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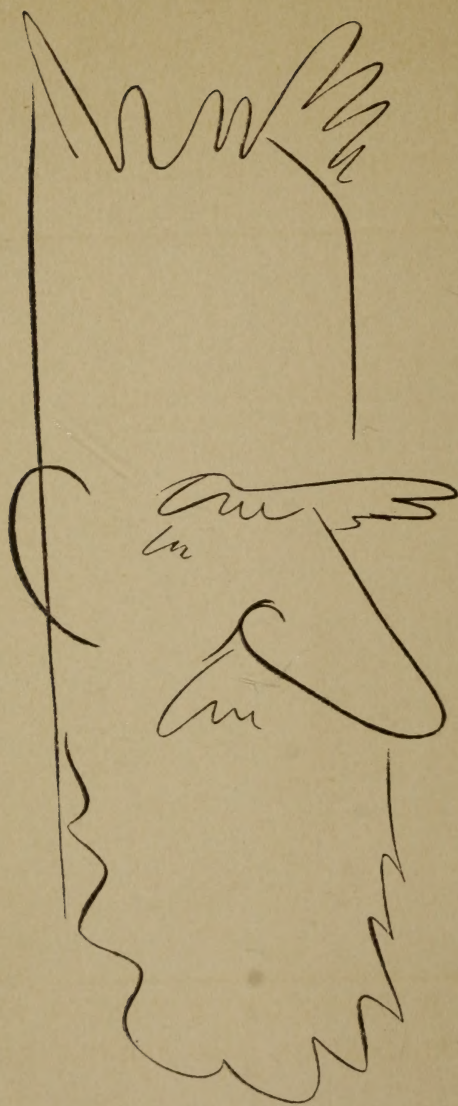
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VENTILATIONS

BEING BIOGRAPHICAL ASIDES



G. Bernard Shaw

VENTILATIONS

BEING BIOGRAPHICAL ASIDES

:::::BY HESKETH PEARSON:::::

AUTHOR OF "THE WHISPERING GALLERY"

ILLUSTRATED WITH
CARICATURES BY
EVA HERMANN

920
P31

1930

J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
PHILADELPHIA AND LONDON

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Printed in the
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G. Bernard Shaw

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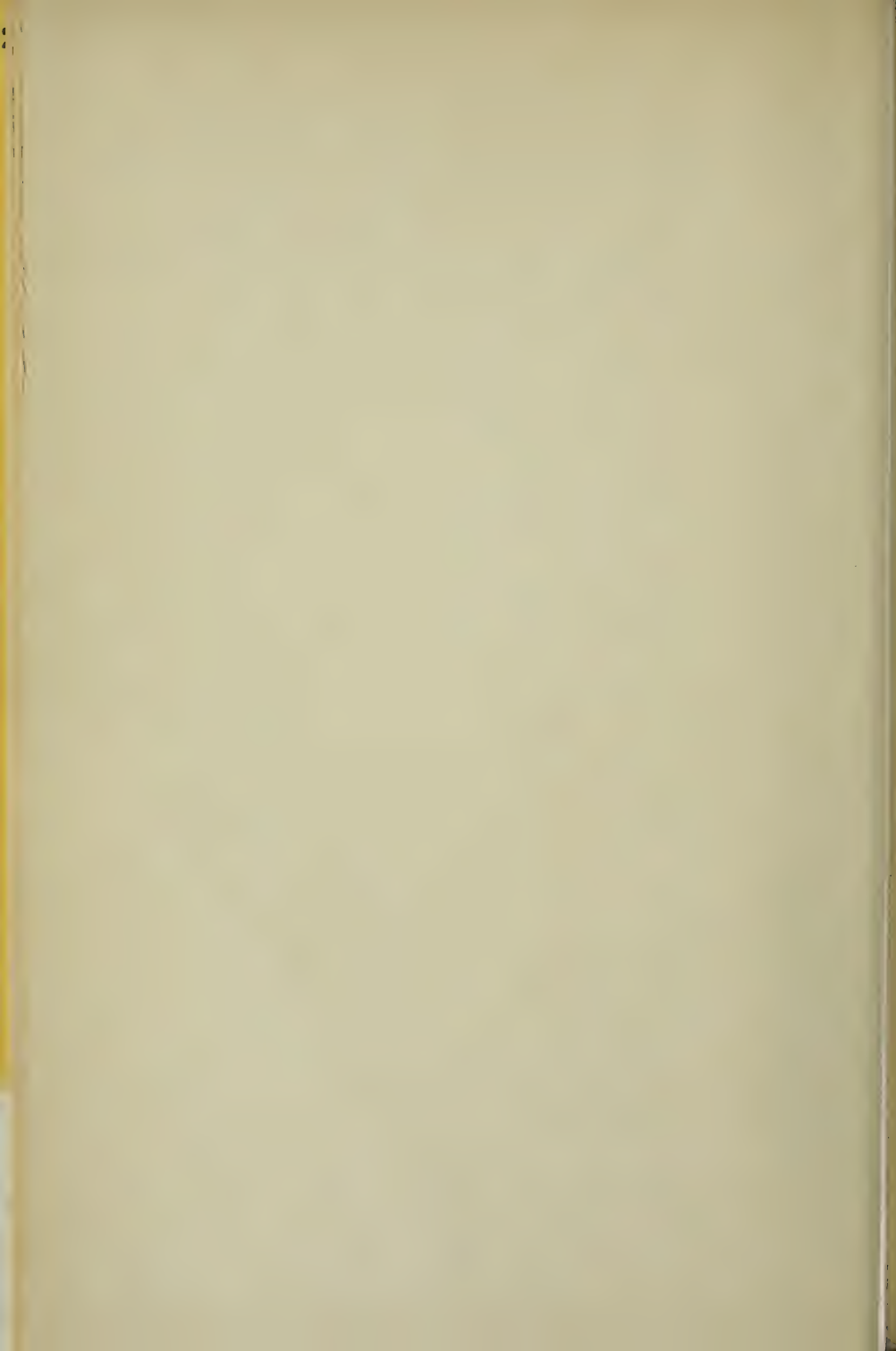
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VENTILATIONS
BEING BIOGRAPHICAL ASIDES

CHAPTER I

Truth in Biography



"WHAT is truth?" said jesting Pilate, but he wasn't jesting when he said it. And he would not stay for an answer because he knew there wasn't one. No one has ever satisfactorily answered the question, and no one ever will answer it to everyone else's satisfaction. It can only be answered with a flat negative: there is no such thing as truth. Or, if you like it better, there are a million aspects of the same truth, each one of which may seem to contradict the other.

In biography this question of truth is always cropping up. A short while ago Mr. Harold Nicolson wrote a book in which he declared that truth is the primary requisite of what he calls "pure" biography. But the very finest biographer can only tell the truth as he sees it, and the probability is that it will not be the truth as other people see it. "Pure" biography is therefore a chimera, a dream.

Take the case of Boswell, who wrote what is considered by most critics our greatest biography. It could, I think, be easily proved that he gives a

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partial presentment of Dr. Johnson, and therefore, ultimately, an untruthful one. For example, his picture of Oliver Goldsmith is that of a vain, ignorant, jealous, peevish, envious, frivolous, bad-mannered wastrel. He fails to explain how Johnson not only endures such a creature but actually loves him. One is forced to the conclusion either that his portrait of Goldsmith is a grotesque caricature or that he has missed something vital in Johnson's character that made the company of a vain, ignorant, jealous, peevish, envious, frivolous, bad-mannered wastrel attractive to him.

Boswell's whole tone in discussing Goldsmith is offensively patronizing, which of course puts the intelligent reader on his guard and makes him read carefully between the lines. But in the meantime Truth is dodging about all over the place and Boswell is shutting one eye pretty tightly whenever it comes into view.

Many instances of Bozzy's partiality could be cited. Mrs. Thrale has given her versions of Boswell's versions of several incidents, which amount in some cases to flat contradictions. Where are we

to get a resemblance to the final truth? Clearly not from any one source.

Lockhart, the biographer who is supposed to stand second to Boswell, has an interesting reflection on the Boswellian method. He says:

“To report conversations fairly, it is a necessary prerequisite that we should be completely familiar with all the interlocutors, and understand thoroughly all their minutest relations, and points of common knowledge and common feeling, with each other. He who does not, must be perpetually in danger of misinterpreting sportive allusions into serious statement; and the man who was only recalling, by some jocular phrase or half-phrase, to an old companion, some trivial reminiscence of their boyhood or youth, may be represented as expressing, upon some person or incident casually tabled, an opinion which he had never framed, or if he had, would never have given words to in any mixed assemblage—not even among what the world calls *friends* at his own board. In proportion as a man is witty and humorous, there will always be about him and his a widening maze and wilderness of cues and catchwords, which the uninitiated will,

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if they are bold enough to try interpretation, construe, ever and anon, egregiously amiss—not seldom into arrant falsity. For this one reason, to say nothing of many others, I consider no man justified in journalizing what he sees and hears in a domestic circle where he is not thoroughly at home; and I think there are still higher and better reasons why he should not do so where he is.”

That is a sound statement, and it completely disposes of the assertion that Boswell’s “Johnson” is a model of biographical accuracy. But though Boswell was not an ideal biographer, he left a mine of magnificent biographical material. And he was a great creative artist. Bernard Shaw once informed me, on the back of a post card, that Boswell “created” Johnson much as Shakespeare created Falstaff and Hamlet. I agree; though perhaps one ought to add that there was far more of Falstaff in Shakespeare than of Johnson in Boswell, and that there was, after all, a lexicographer before his biographer.

Boswell had caught Johnson’s mannerism of speech and could render it infallibly on all occasions. But no one will ever persuade me that Boswell made more than a cursory note or so as a basis for any

lengthy conversation in his book. For one thing note-taking on a large scale would not have been tolerated by the rest of the company. For another Boswell was an extremely sociable man, highly responsive to the stimulus of conversation as well as wine, and hadn't the true reporter's detachment.

My own view is that whenever Boswell's memory failed him, his imagination helped him out. He had studied Johnson so closely that he was able to *feel* how Johnson would have dealt with any given theme and how he would have expressed himself. This sort of thing is far more common than many people suppose. All good parodies are the fruit of such study. And when the subject of the study has a strongly marked and peculiar personality, as was pre-eminently the case with Johnson, you get a whole crop of Boswells, Mrs. Thrales and Fanny Burneys, each of whom can give you, with variations that accord with their own sensibilities, the pith and marrow of their subject's eccentric genius.

What places Boswell high above the Thrales and Burneys is, firstly, his dramatic genius, and, secondly, his amazing gift for reproducing long conversations that were not merely humorous nor

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anecdotal nor illustrative of any especially memorable theme. It required real genius to display Johnson frequently talking at large on any subject that came up for discussion, and doing it so well that no one doubted the general accuracy of the reproduction. Johnson himself read the greater part of the "Tour to the Hebrides" and was pleased with the record of his talk—as indeed he well might be, since it was far more attractive than his own writings. And Boswell's dramatic genius was superb. No one has ever approached him in the art of describing an incident from real life; his grasp of essentials, spareness of words and simplicity of narrative, make a scene live as vividly in the memory as anything we have ourselves witnessed.

But even as the world's greatest diarist Boswell's so-called accuracy must be spoken of with reserve. He had a definite point of view; he wanted to exhibit Johnson from a certain number of angles that appealed to him. He suppressed and selected and enlarged with absolute freedom. It is possible, though highly improbable, that he never saw the Burney Johnson and the Thrale Johnson; but he certainly had no intention of exhibiting such a vari-

ous person. It was as the eccentric and clubbable and sometimes violent philosopher that Boswell wished to preserve Johnson, and the result entitles him to the praise we usually reserve for the greatest creative artists.

What we must get out of our heads is the absurd supposition that Boswell's work is necessarily more exact and life-like than that of any other creative artist. He must be regarded as a dramatist, who depicted Johnson just as Shakespeare depicted Falstaff, from certain definite aspects. And his exceptional success must be judged, not as the success of a Lockhart is judged, but as the success of a Rabelais is judged.

By the use of letters, dates, notes, and other paraphernalia, and with the aid of an excellent memory, he was able of course to throw an atmosphere of remarkable verisimilitude over the whole work; but his real triumph was due to his creative faculty, his ability to get inside the mind of another man and reveal it in that man's own arrestingly individual style. Frequently, too, he improved upon the model and produced something more characteristically

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Johnsonian than Johnson. Of that I am as convinced as I can be of anything in this world.

I have been a bit of a Boswell myself at one time or another and know exactly how it is done. I shall speak of my best effort in that direction later on. But as a specimen of the kind of thing I have been talking about, I print a little dialogue which I wrote a few years back. It was published in *The Adelphi* and caused the editor, Mr. Middleton Murry, to be bombarded with queries from other editors, who wanted to quote from it fully if its truthfulness could be guaranteed.

I will now admit for the first time that it was not true, in the sense that it never happened, but that it was true in the higher sense that it might and certainly ought to have happened. The reason it appears here (apart from the fact that there is no earthly reason why *anything* shouldn't appear in a discursive book of this nature) is not that I want to compare my trifle with anything of Boswell's. I merely wish to prove that it is quite possible for one man who has studied two others from a distance to give a reproduction of their manner of speech and drift of thought that may pass among persons who

know them well for a faithful record of an actual conversation between them—as indeed this did.

And if such a thing can be achieved by an outsider, without leaving too strong an impression of parody, imagine how relatively easy it must be for one who knows his subjects well, as Boswell knew the Johnson circle. Of course Boswell kept it up for about a thousand pages, and interspersed innumerable incidents that gave movement and vitality to the whole, which made his achievement unique. But—well, anyhow, here's my dialogue, complete with preface, exactly as it appeared in *The Adelphi*:

I had for years longed to be present at a word-war between intellectual giants. And at last, most unexpectedly, my desire was gratified. It was at the house of a friend in Chelsea. Mr. Bernard Shaw had been there for at least an hour and was just on the point of leaving when Mr. G. K. Chesterton was announced. They instantly started a debate, as naturally as a cat and dog start a fight, and the rest of us grouped ourselves round them, as naturally as street-loiterers surround the cat and dog.

Consider my position. It was both fortunate and

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difficult. To begin with, my wildest dream had been realized. Here were, beyond comparison, the two greatest word-jugglers of the century. One of them was a greater man than Socrates—yet I knew he had no Plato. The other was a greater wit than Johnson—yet I knew he had no Boswell. Could I, then, enjoy myself to the full and take no thought for the morrow? Did I not rather owe a duty to posterity, and was I not bound to preserve at least ten minutes of that feast of reason and that flow of soul which, but for me, would be lost to the world for ever?

I only had about half a minute to make a decision. Well, I was not conscious of making a decision at all. I simply know that my hand went to my pocket-book (posterity no doubt guiding it there in spite of myself) and before Mr. Shaw had got the first sentence off his tongue, my pencil was busy.

Here, therefore, is that remarkable discourse, given just as it came, in the raw, hot from the brains of the mighty disputants.

G. B. S. Have you any adequate excuse to make us for not being drunk?

G. K. C. I am desperately drunk. There is only one form of drunkenness that I acknowledge

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—the drunkenness of sobriety. As a consequence of not having tasted a drop of wine or ale today, I am suffering from *delirium tremens*.

G. B. S. In that case perhaps you will please tell us why you are sober?

G. K. C. That, I fear, is quite impossible. I can explain nothing when I am sober. Sobriety clouds the mind; drink clears it. I would explain anything, at any length, under the calming, clarifying influence of drink. If only you would take my advice, your own style, to say nothing of your mind, would improve beyond imagination. At present your writing is too parenthetical; you wander, lost, in a maze of speculation, in a pool of prudery. Compare with your straggling sentences my crisp phrases. I dip my nib in the pot of Bacchus.

G. B. S. I don't believe it for a moment. Your pretended love of wine is a snare and a delusion. It is skilfully paraded and exploited by yourself in order to catch all the brainless bairns who look to romance to lead

them back into the Garden of Eden. Of course you are superlatively clever; no one denies that. And the cleverest thing you ever did in your life was to hang out the signboard of mediaevalism. You suddenly realized with a shock that there was no room for a second Shaw among the modern intellectuals. Were you daunted? Not you! You instantly proclaimed to the whole world that you had examined Socialism and found it wanting. Actually you had examined nothing except the state of the book-market, a very cursory glance at which revealed to you that the camp of reaction lacked a brain to give its ideals (or want of them) expression. At the same time you had to admit, even to yourself, that you were a democrat at heart, and your great difficulty was to reconcile your modernism with the exigency of the situation. So what did you do? You talked about Guilds, about Peasant Proprietorship, for all the world as if Henry V were occupying the throne

of Edward VII; and by carefully evading every knotty point in the Socialist case and riding roughshod over the unanswerable, annihilating logic of the Fabians which cropped up at every turn, you managed to rally all the wild, romantic idiots in the country round your banner. Then, in order to increase your following and grapple the converts to you with hoops of steel, you professed yourself a High Churchman and a deep drinker. Your slogan became: Back to the land, back to the priest, back to the bottle! Up to a certain point I am willing to believe that all this paradox-prancing, all this intellectual hunt-the-slipper and anachronistic nursery-nonsense, appealed to you. Whether you ever seriously believed in it, whether you have ever seriously believed in anything, I am quite incapable of deciding, since you don't really know what you believe or disbelieve yourself. But there dawned a day—a terrible day for you—when Hilaire Belloc loomed into your

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life. Then indeed you were lost for ever. He made you dignify your monstrosities with the name of Faith. For you, at any rate, he turned your pranks into prayers, your somersaults into sacraments, your oddities into oblations. By degrees, under his influence, your fun turned to fury. Because the Roman Church says that the indiscriminate breeding of babies is the first duty of civilized man (meaning, of course, babies born for the Church of Rome), you turned and rent the eugenicists, whose sole crime is that they prefer healthy babies to diseased ones. You even suggested that Sir Francis Galton, a charming old gentleman of unblemished moral character, must have been a prurient black-guard whose loathsome lewdness was fitly camouflaged by the imposition of this obscene science upon the world. With viperish violence, and under the same influence, you then fell upon the Jews. Forgetting, with characteristic absence of mind, that Jesus Christ was distinctly Hebraic, you

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implied that all the dark and dirty dealings in the world were directly traceable to the malign activities of that race. You whipped yourself into a frenzy on the subject; you even paid £1000 for the pleasure of saying in print that a certain Jewish gentleman (who naturally sued you for libel) was a scoundrel. And yet we all know perfectly well that you aren't half as bad as you paint yourself. I asked you just now why you weren't drunk. The reason I did so was because in all your writings you glorify inebriation to such an extent that anyone who doesn't know you must assume that you spend the whole of your time in staggering from pub to pub and scribbling your books and articles against the various lamp-posts en route. I, of course, know it's all bunkum. I know that everything you say is bunkum, though a fair amount of it is inspired bunkum. I realize that the only reason you ever go near a pub is to placate your own admirers, who may have come from Kamschatka in

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order to see you, and who would be scandalized almost to the verge of suicide if you didn't stand up and soak your quart like a man.

G. K. C. All of which merely goes to prove that you prefer potatoes to potations. Your natural love of truth has been undermined by an acquired love of turnips. The real battle of your life has not been Socialism *versus* Capitalism, but Vegetables *versus* Veracity. Your case is extraordinarily interesting, and I think I can state it in about half the time you took to manufacture a purely fictitious case against me. Elsewhere I have made it abundantly clear that you are a spiritual descendant of Bunyan, that you are, in fact, an out-and-out Puritan.

G. B. S. As I have spent the greater part of my life in telling the world that Bunyan is better than Shakespeare, it did not require a superman to point out that I have more in common with Oliver Cromwell than Charles the First. But to call me a Puritan in the old-fashioned sense of the word is

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sheer folly. All this nonsense about my spiritual ancestry, though an excellent family joke, is frightfully misleading. You must really switch on to something else. It is my firm opinion that nearly all the Puritans in history who were not born fools were unmitigated scoundrels. I must therefore ask you to be good enough in future to qualify the epithet. You can do this in the following manner: "When I call Mr. Shaw a Puritan, I merely mean to infer (1) that he doesn't spend his nights under a table, a victim to mixed drinks, (2) that he doesn't write his books under the influence of opium, morphia or cocaine, and (3)' that he doesn't keep a harem." That should help to clarify the situation for those who are not in the joke.

G. K. C. Your objections to being called a Puritan are puritanical and beside the point. I have written a book proving up to the hilt that your puritanism is fundamental. You have been unable to answer it.

G. B. S. I have spent my life answering it, both

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before and since the appearance of your book—which, by the way, might just as well have been entitled “Gilbert Keith Chesterton by Himself.”

G. K. C. I don't doubt your *belief* that you are not a Puritan. I simply state it as an indisputable fact that you *are* one. For the sake of argument I will grant that you may not be a Puritan with a capital “P,” but you are most certainly a puritan with a small “p.” That, however, is a metaphysical quibble. The real case against you is not that you prefer Bunyan to Shakespeare, or John Knox to Mary Stuart, or Shelley to Byron, or Ibsen to Pinero—but that you are constitutionally incapable of understanding the Catholic standpoint, which is, I need scarcely say, my own standpoint.

G. B. S. How in thunder can I understand a point of view that doesn't exist? Your standpoint is that there is no standpoint. Has anyone on this planet yet discovered what opinions you really hold? Have you even allowed a solitary soul to find out whether you hold

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any opinions at all? There is not a single principle in the universe that you have ever seriously attacked or seriously defended. No one knows anything about you. Have you ever told a single human being what you believe, why you believe it, or whether you believe that there is a Belief? Your whole life has been spent in obfuscating issues. You fight the good fight with all your might—not in order to win, because that would mean the end of your fight, but for the mere pleasure of fighting. You pitch on some opponent (preferably myself), whom in your heart of hearts you secretly admire for the ruthlessness and sincerity with which he holds his convictions, and then you proceed to graft the most preposterous opinions and inconceivable legends on him for the sole purpose of launching a terrific crusade against him. You are just like Don Quixote; and though your lunacy on some occasions makes his seem pale by comparison, you

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yet contrive in some mysterious manner to be your own Sancho Panza.

G. K. C. Exactly; and anybody but you could see that the combination of these two extremes forms the Catholic standpoint. You might almost have been quoting me when you said just now that the Catholic standpoint is that there is no standpoint. The only man who can conscientiously take up a definite standpoint in religious matters is the atheist. The atheist states as a positive fact that there is no God. Thereafter he is able, by a perfectly logical process, to prove this and to prove that to his own complete satisfaction. The Catholic is not so pragmatical as the atheist or the Puritan. His Faith is built on Belief, not on Knowledge (falsely so-called). He is consequently able to appreciate and sympathize with every form of human activity. He takes the whole world to his heart. He loves because it is human to love, hates because it is human to hate, eats, drinks and is merry because it is human to eat, drink and be

merry. He leads a crusade, not because it is right, but because it is glorious to do so. He is neither positive nor constructive. He is not even consistent. Every book I write, every article I pen, every argument I use, contradicts some other book, some other article, some other argument of my own. What does it matter? Life is contradictory, and we are Life. We accept Life as a gift from God; we do not accept God as a gift from Life. You Puritans——

G. B. S. I have already told you that I am not a Puritan!

G. K. C. You Puritans, I say, fashion God in your own image. You conceive the truth to lie in yourselves. You would not be content merely to remold the world nearer to the heart's desire; you would recast it entirely to the highbrow's dream. The magnificence of uncertainty, the splendor of ignorance, the sublime impossibility of Nature, the marvel and mystery of this miraculous and ridiculous thing called Life——all this is lost on you. It is lost on you

because yours is a world of rush, not rollick, where the station hotel has usurped the wayside tavern, where the draught of beer has given place to the sip of bovril, and where Shakespeare and Homer have been run to earth by Sherlock Holmes. We Catholics do not pretend to a knowledge we have not got. We see a thing that we believe to be harmful and we fight it. We see a thing that we believe to be good and we love it. We would not take it upon ourselves to say that this is altogether wrong, or that altogether right, because we think that the wrong may be created by God for a purpose, which it would be presumptuous in us to divine. When you Puritans can explain, conclusively and convincingly, how the daisies grow, we will be willing to believe that you can teach us something. Until then you can hardly expect us to accept your verdict that beer was made not for man but for watering cauliflowers, that Jews were made not for Jerusalem but for

the financial control of Christendom, that babies were born not for the home but for the laboratory, and that man was made not to enjoy himself but to read Fabian tracts and listen to University Extension lectures.

G. B. S. I think I catch your drift. If a manure-heap close to your front-door were fouling the neighborhood, you wouldn't remove it because God might have placed it there in order to test your sense of smell.

G. K. C. I couldn't overlook the possibility that my next-door neighbor might be a Socialist; in which case the manure-heap would have its uses.

G. B. S. You are evading the point.

G. K. C. Points are made to evade. Consider the history of the rapier.

G. B. S. There is no getting at you. You are as bad as Dr. Johnson. When your pistol misses fire, which it usually does, you knock your opponent down with the butt-end. Why will you never come to grips?

G. K. C. The art of argument lies in the ingenuity

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with which one can hide and seek simultaneously.

G. B. S. But what becomes of your philosophy?

G. K. C. My philosophy is in the thrust, not in the parry.

G. B. S. I don't see that. You must be able to hold your own field while you are advancing on the enemy's territory.

G. K. C. Not necessarily. If my attack is strenuous enough, the enemy will require all his strength to hold his own fortifications.

G. B. S. And if he succeeds in holding them?

G. K. C. Then I retire, bring up my reserves, and attack him again in a totally unexpected quarter.

G. B. S. But if he attacks you while you are retiring?

G. K. C. I go to ground.

G. B. S. I see. Heads you win, tails he loses, all the way.

G. K. C. Precisely.

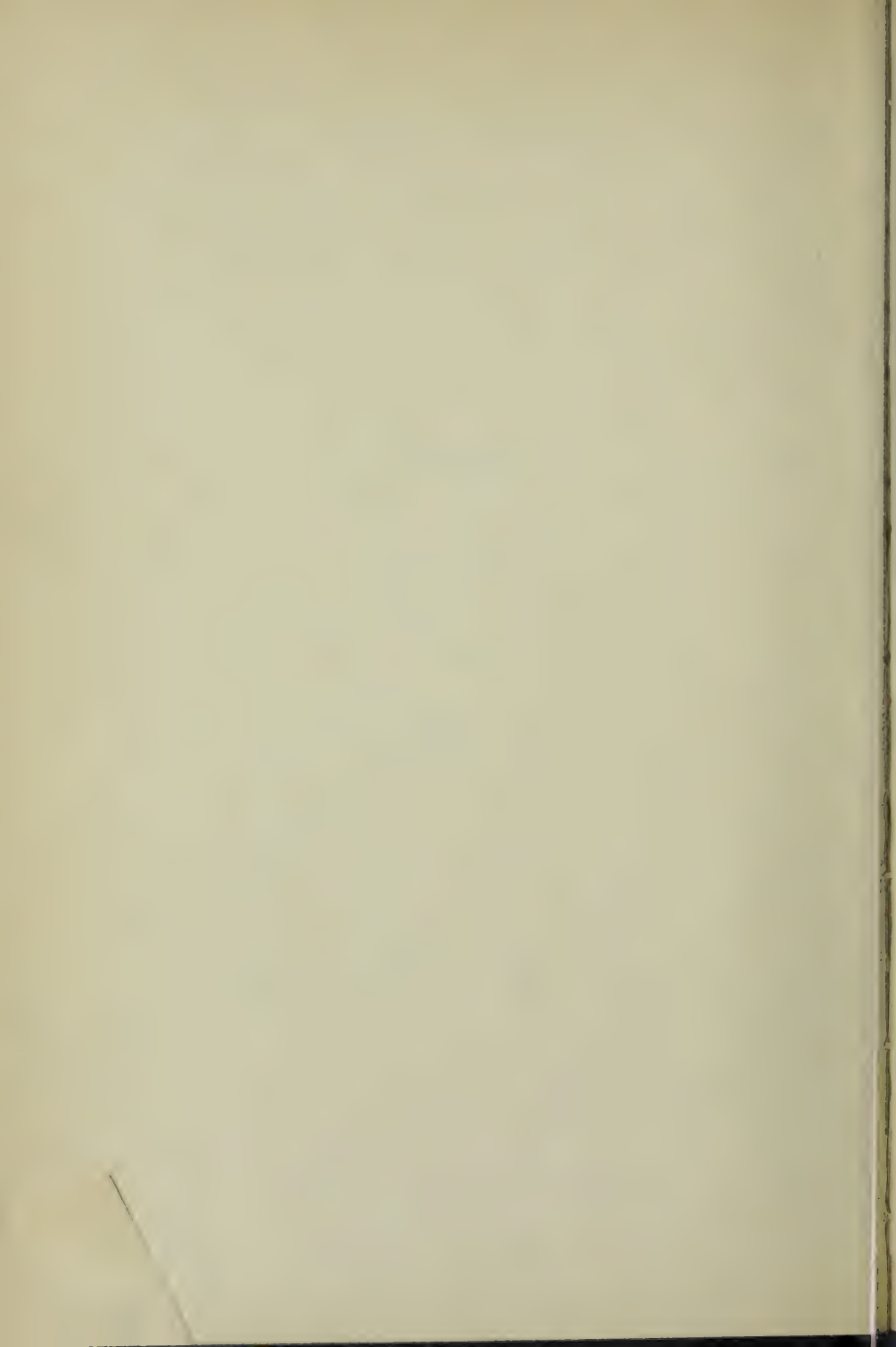
G. B. S. Thank you. I am wasting my time. Good-evening.

(Rapid exit of G. B. S.)

CHAPTER II

Evasion in Biography

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IN ORDER to prove that Boswell was a great creative artist, it is necessary to prove that he was a liar. King David said in his haste that "all men are liars." He would have come to the same conclusion if he had taken his time about it. But there are liars *and* liars. Some people lie for the artistic pleasure of lying; most lie for their daily bread; all lie for the amenities of social life; a lot lie because the truth pains them. Boswell lied because he was vain.

Johnson was *his* creation. Let anyone dispute it who dared! Intruders on his domain must be repulsed. His was the right of possession; and any view of Johnson that was not his, or did not agree with his, was wrong. Therefore he dispraised Hawkins; therefore he belittled Mrs. Thrale; therefore he selected with care and evaded or glossed over any really unpleasant aspects of his hero's character. For, mark, there is nothing in his portrait of Johnson that really riles or nauseates the reader. In his artfully ingenuous way Boswell conveys the impression of holding nothing back, of tell-

ing the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

But, as a matter of fact, he was a master of evasion. The truly detestable side of Johnson was carefully screened by this great artist in portraiture. No one could accuse him of deliberately lying. He told the truth, and nothing but the truth (as he saw it, or wished to see it) but those aspects of the truth which he disliked he either suppressed or pretended to disbelieve. By evasion the biographer can save his face; and evasion of important details is equivalent to distortion, though it usually passes for discretion. A single example, though there are dozens, will prove conclusively Boswell's artistry and mendacity.

On Wednesday, April 15, 1778, Boswell dined at Mr. Dilly's. There were present Dr. Johnson, Dr. Mayo, the Rev. Beresford, Mrs. Knowles (a famous Quakeress), and Miss Seward (the "Swan" of Lichfield). Boswell admits that he was in "high spirits" (i.e., inebriated) before the dinner commenced. Nevertheless he gives a long account of the conversation on that occasion (how accurately I leave any of my readers who have been drunk to

guess). But it so happened that—possibly owing to his “high spirits”—he only had a hazy recollection of a certain argument that took place between Mrs. Knowles and Dr. Johnson. So after Johnson’s death he wrote to Miss Seward, who had made a minute of the debate at the time of its occurrence, begging her for the verbatim report of what he called “that tremendous conversation at Dilly’s.” She sent it him.

The talk centered round a certain girl named Miss Harry, who had forfeited her father’s love and a hundred thousand pounds by becoming a Quaker.* Johnson had been very fond of her, but was furious when she joined the Society of Friends. One day she met him in the street and asked how he was. He cut her dead and marched scornfully by. She went home in tears and begged Mrs. Knowles to “plead for her” when next she met Johnson. Mrs. Knowles did so, at Mr. Dilly’s, as follows:

Mrs. K: I am to ask thy indulgence, Doctor, towards a gentle female to whom thou usedst to be kind, and who is uneasy in the loss of that kindness. Jenny Harry

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weeps at the consciousness that thou wilt not speak to her.

Dr. J: Madam, I hate the odious wench, and desire you will not talk to me about her.

Mrs. K: Yet what is her crime, Doctor?

Dr. J: Apostasy, Madam; apostasy from the community in which she was educated.

Mrs. K: Surely the quitting one community for another cannot be a crime, if it is done from motives of conscience. Hadst thou been educated in the Romish church, I must suppose thou wouldst have abjured its errors, and that there would have been merit in the abjuration.

Dr. J: Madam, if I had been educated in the Roman Catholic faith, I believe I should have questioned my right to quit the religion of my fathers; therefore, well may I hate the arrogance of a young wench, who sets herself up for a judge on theological points, and deserts the religion in whose bosom she was nurtured.

Mrs. K: She has not done so; the name and the

faith of Christians are not denied to the sectaries.

Dr. J: If the name is not, the common sense is.

Mrs. K: I will not dispute this point with thee, Doctor, at least at present; it would carry us too far. Suppose it granted that, in the mind of a young girl, the weaker arguments appeared the strongest, her want of better judgment should excite thy pity, not thy resentment.

Dr. J: Madam, it has my anger and my contempt, and always will have them.

Mrs. K: Consider, Doctor, she must be *sincere*. Consider what a noble fortune she has sacrificed.

Dr. J: Madam, Madam, I have never taught myself to consider that the association of folly can extenuate guilt.

Mrs. K: Ah! Doctor, we cannot rationally suppose that the Deity will not pardon a defect in judgment (supposing it should prove one) in that breast where the consideration of serving him, according to its idea, in spirit

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and truth, has been a preferable inducement to that of worldly interest.

Dr. J: Madam, I pretend not to set bounds to the mercy of the Deity; but I hate the wench, and shall ever hate her. I hate all impudence; but the impudence of a chit's apostasy I *nauseate*.

Mrs. K: Jenny is a very gentle creature. She trembles to have offended her parent, though far removed from his presence; she grieves to have offended her guardian, and she is sorry to have offended Dr. Johnson, whom she loved, admired, and honored.

Dr. J: Why, then, Madam, did she not consult the man whom she pretends to have loved, admired, and honored, upon her new-fangled scruples? If she had looked up to that man with any degree of the respect she professes, she would have supposed his ability to judge of fit and right, at least equal to that of a raw wench just out of her primer.

Mrs. K: Ah! Doctor, remember it was not from amongst the witty and the learned that

Christ selected his disciples, and constituted the teachers of his precepts. Jenny thinks Dr. Johnson great and good; but she also thinks the gospel demands and enjoins a simpler form of worship than that of the established church; and that it is not in wit and eloquence to supersede the force of what appears to her a plain and regular system, which cancels all typical and mysterious ceremonies, as fruitless and even idolatrous; and asks only obedience to its injunctions, and the ingenuous homage of a devout heart.

Dr. J: The homage of a fool's head, Madam, you should say, if you will pester me about the ridiculous wench.

Mrs. K: If thou choosest to suppose her ridiculous, thou canst not deny that she has been religious, sincere, disinterested. Canst thou believe that the gate of Heaven will be shut to the tender and pious mind, whose *first* consideration has been that of apprehended duty?

Dr. J: Pho, pho, Madam, who says it will?

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Mrs. K: Then if Heaven shuts not its gate, shall man shut his heart? If the Deity accept the homage of such as sincerely serve him under every form of worship, Dr. Johnson and this humble girl will, it is to be hoped, meet in a blessed eternity, whither human animosity must *not* be carried.

Dr. J: Madam, I am not fond of meeting fools anywhere; they are detestable company, and while it is in my power to avoid conversing with them, I certainly shall exert that power; and so you may tell the odious wench, whom you have persuaded to think herself a saint, and of whom you will, I suppose, make a preacher; but I shall take care she does not preach to *me*.

At this point Boswell whispered to Miss Seward: "I never saw this mighty lion so chafed before."

Miss Seward, then, sent this account to Boswell, at his request. He ignored it entirely; but wrote an equivocal note, in which he declared that Mrs. Knowles had sent him a dialogue "which, after many years had elapsed, she wrote down as having passed between Dr. Johnson and herself at this in-

terview. As I had not the least recollection of it, and did not find the smallest trace of it in my *Record* taken at the time, I could not in consistency with my firm regard to authenticity, insert it in my work."

"Firm regard to authenticity" is good. He makes no reference whatever to Miss Seward in this note or to the minute of the conversation she made *at the time*.

Boswell's own record of what took place reads as follows:

Mrs. Knowles mentioned, as a proselyte to Quakerism, Miss ——, a young lady well known to Johnson, for whom he had shown much affection; while she ever had, and still retained, a great respect for him. Mrs. Knowles at the same time took an opportunity of letting him know "that the amiable young creature was sorry at finding that he was offended at her leaving the Church of England and embracing a simpler faith"; and in the gentlest and most persuasive manner, solicited his kind indulgence for what was sincerely a matter of conscience.

Dr. J: (*frowning very angrily*) Madam, she is an odious wench. She could not have any

proper conviction that it was her duty to change her religion, which is the most important of all subjects, and should be studied with all care, and with all the helps we can get. She knew no more of the Church which she left, and that which she embraced, than she did of the difference between the Copernican and Ptolemaick systems.

Mrs. K: She had the New Testament before her.

Dr. J: Madam, she could not understand the New Testament, the most difficult book in the world, for which the study of a life is required.

Mrs. K: It is clear as to essentials.

Dr. J: But not as to controversial points. The heathens were easily converted, because they had nothing to give up; but we ought not, without very strong conviction indeed, to desert the religion in which we have been educated. That is the religion given you, the religion in which it may be said Providence has placed you. If you live conscientiously in that religion, you may

be safe. But error is dangerous indeed, if you err when you choose a religion for yourself.

Mrs. K: Must we, then, go by implicit faith?

Dr. J: Why, Madam, the greatest part of our knowledge is implicit faith; and as to religion, have we heard all that a disciple of Confucius, all that a Mahometan, can say for himself?

He then rose again into passion, and attacked the young proselyte in the severest terms of reproach, so that both the ladies seemed to be much shocked.

Now here we have the same scene recorded by two shrewd observers in entirely different language. Boswell, while ingenuously admitting Johnson's rage, is careful not to define its manifestations. In the Seward record we have an example of bigotry in its most pernicious form. In the Boswell record we have a noble display of righteous indignation and religious emotion.

I, personally, believe Miss Seward, who had no axe to grind, no hero to exalt, no villain to debase. She never for a moment thought Boswell would use

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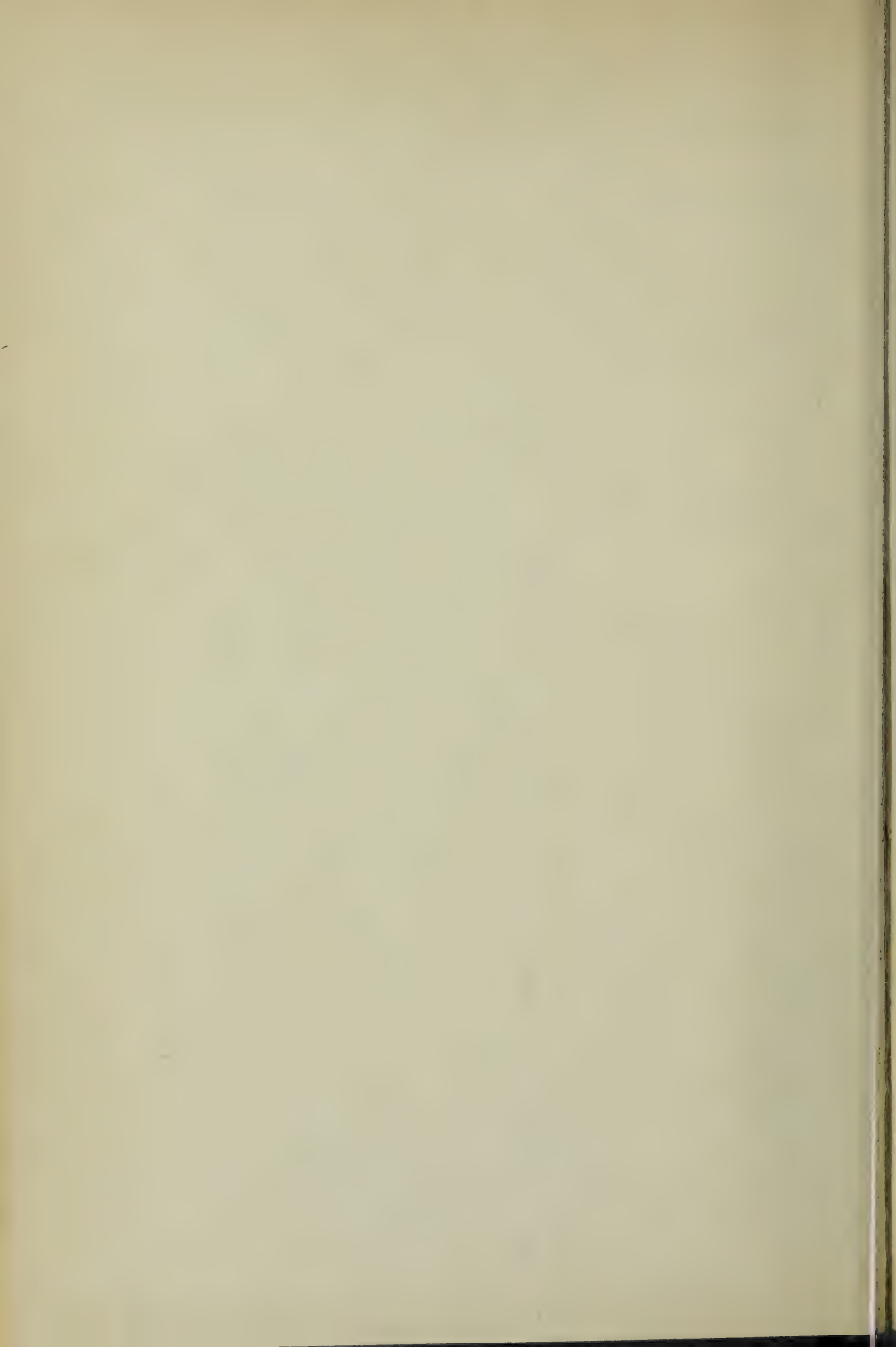
her account. In a letter she wrote to Mrs. Knowles on March 27, 1785, we read this:

“Mr. Boswell desires I will send him the minute I made at the time of that, as he justly calls it, tremendous conversation at Dilly’s, between you and Dr. Johnson on the subject of Miss Harry’s commencing Quaker. Boswell had so often spoke to me, with regret, over the ferocious, reasonless, and unchristian violence of his idol that night, it looks impartial beyond my hopes, that he requests me to arrange it. I had omitted to send it in the first collection, from my hopelessness that Mr. Boswell would insert it in his life of the Colossus. Time may have worn away those deep-indented lines of bigot fierceness from the memory of the biographer, and the hand of affection may not be firm enough to resolve upon engraving them.”

I fear there was more art than “high spirits” in the Boswellian version of that “tremendous conversation.”

CHAPTER III

Personal Biography



WHAT I mean by a "personal" biography may be put in a phrase. It is simply the "Life" of a man written by someone who knew him well. In effect, therefore, it is the portrait of a man from one point of view. The two finest examples of "personal" biography in English are Boswell's "Johnson" and Frank Harris's "Oscar Wilde." Both are to a large extent creative; but while Boswell went to great pains to re-create both the substance and the manner of Johnson's speech, Harris has only taken the trouble to render the substance of Wilde's conversation, giving it to the world in his own manner.

There are innumerable drawbacks to the "personal" method. They were summarized admirably by a gentleman named Bahram, whose opinions on this and a hundred other subjects were set forth in my book "A Persian Critic." I cannot do better than quote him on the subject of biography.

"Boswell, of course, is wonderful. His work is a masterpiece of journalism. He is one of the world's finest reporters, with a keener eye than Sheridan

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for a good scene, and easily the best literary photographer in English. . . . But the great biographer must be a painter, not a photographer, a Rembrandt, not a Daguerre. He must seek out the soul of his subject, finding it in this piece of tittle-tattle, in that public gesture. His art will be judged by what he leaves out just as much as by what he puts in. Selection, condensation, dramatic use of significant details—these are the essentials. He must know when the trivial is vital and when the imposing is redundant. He must maintain an attitude of strict neutrality, giving an ear equally to the praises of the dining-room and the strictures of the servants' hall. . . .”

“In that case,” I interrupted, “unless he is superhuman, he ought never to have been on familiar terms with the subject of his work.”

“He should never have spoken to him!” answered Bahram promptly. “Personal contact blurs the vision. There is nothing so dangerous to truth as intimate knowledge. You have only to think how one man’s personality affects any two people quite differently in order to realize how absolutely necessary it is for a biographer to examine his subject

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from a distance. The mere fact that a man has both friends and enemies proves this conclusively. Believe me, intimacy is fatal to biography. It demoralizes. Influence, one way or another, is bound to creep in, and impartiality is sure to creep out. No; a man's friends should write personal sketches of him—his enemies as well—and every aspect will help the biographer to paint the final portrait. The tradition that only a disciple can be trusted to write a man's 'Life' has, more than anything else, ruined biographical literature in your country."

I do not agree with my Persian friend's remark that Boswell was a literary photographer; I have already given several reasons for my belief that he was a creative artist, his Johnson, to my mind, standing almost on a level with Shakespeare's Falstaff; but for the rest of Bahram's discourse I have nothing but praise. Anything further that I could say would merely take the form of amplification and emphasis.

One point, however, I would like to stress. What gives to Boswell's work its perennially fresh, life-like and natural quality is the constant flow of anecdotes. (Since the retailing of incidents in private life

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gives zest and spirit to all our best biography, it is interesting to remember that the word "anecdote" means in the original Greek "not published"!)

Later on I shall have a chapter about reminiscences, diaries and such-like productions. At the moment I am only concerned with the value of their contribution to the art of biography, which simply cannot be over-rated.

In a sense all "personal" biographies are reminiscences. There is no attempt in them to paint the subject in any attitude not perceived by the painter; and, human nature being what it is, this means that a "personal" biography which gives as much as one tenth of a man's character and personality is a pretty considerable achievement. Boswell may tell us what Reynolds, Burke, Goldsmith, Langton, Beauclerk and Garrick thought of Johnson; but as they have all seen him from roughly the same angle as Boswell, we merely get so many confirmations of Boswell's portrait. Even had they seen him from totally different angles, even had Boswell been able to record seven utterly dissimilar impressions of Johnson, he would still have been forced to omit seven or seventy times seven other aspects of his sub-

ject, every one of which might have produced a picture violently at variance with the one he has drawn.

The truth is that the more intimately we know a man the less completely do we know him. Just as a natural object can only be seen in its true proportion from a distance, so a man's character can only be seen in its true proportion from outside his immediate circle of friends. "Unfortunately," as Mr. Strachey once said, "it is not always a man's friends who know him best."

But in so far as the "personal" biography contains a considerable quantity of character-revealing anecdotes, its value to the impartial biographer is great. He uses it, just as he uses letters, diaries, reminiscences, etc., in order to paint a synthetic portrait that will satisfy because of its completeness.

Anecdotes, however, are of various value. Over fifty per cent of them might have been told of Tom, Dick or Harry, because Tom, Dick and Harry are all liable to behave in much the same sort of way, given the same sort of circumstances. It would, I think, be true to say that the majority of anecdotes do not reveal a particular character and are therefore worthless to the biographer. Military and med-

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ical stories have a sameness about them which suggests a depressing monotony of types among soldiers and doctors, and I dare say the same can be said of the other professions.

To have any real biographical value, an anecdote must reveal a salient characteristic of a particular man; it must be untransferable. When it achieves this, it is more valuable than a dozen chapters devoted to his ordinary sayings and doings.

I will give an instance of what I mean. The late Lord Oxford was renowned for a scholarship which I am not sufficient of a scholar to assess, though I am inclined to think his fame in this respect was largely due to the effect of his ponderous periods on an unscholarly age. His legal knowledge was also, we are told, unrivalled; and there can be no doubt that he impressed his personality very decidedly on the House of Commons. He was, in short, a man of parts, who will sooner or later be buried in a biography of exceptional magnitude.

In it we shall be told of his political and diplomatic achievements, we shall be asked to wade through his weighty perorations, we shall be treated here and there to some decorous but wretchedly un-

revealing anecdote, and we shall survive the ordeal (by the aid of several judicious jumps) in an elevated, if slightly comatose, frame of mind. Of course we shan't learn anything of the least importance about Lord Oxford, and the mass of trivialities we have ploughed through will be quickly forgotten.

Which will be a pity. For Lord Oxford had one very remarkable quality. This quality will not, I fear, be apparent in his official biography, which will be devoted to the recapitulation of qualities he shared in common with a hundred other distinguished parliamentarians. Hence the following anecdote, in which his outstanding characteristic will be found enshrined.

The guard had whistled, the engine had whistled, and the Dover train began to move out of Victoria station. It was in the month of September, 1924. The solitary occupant of a first-class compartment sighed with relief at the prospect of his happy isolation until the train reached its destination.

But the sigh was a little premature. The door was suddenly wrenched open, and a short, stoutish man entered like a cannon-ball and sat with extraordinary

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precipitancy on the solitary occupant's attaché case, which lay open on the opposite seat.

The newcomer instantly announced himself by name, and before the other had thoroughly faced the fact that he was no longer solitary his ears were being deafened by a recital of the short, stout gentleman's autobiography, which began with the statement, "These champagne lunches are bloody silly!"—a remark that appeared to necessitate an explanatory footnote in the shape of his life's story.

For present purposes his recital must be abbreviated. Enough, then, that the newcomer's name was General Corrigan, Mexican Minister for Foreign Affairs in the government of President Calles. The General was an Irishman, but he had gone in early youth to Canada, where he had received a possibly fragmentary education at McGill University. His great friend there was Calles, with whom he afterwards knocked about for years, working eighteen hours a day in mines and what-not.

He had fought for England during the war, had become a Colonel, had returned to Mexico at the conclusion of hostilities, and had arranged a revolution with Calles against the administration of Presi-

dent Obregon. His job was to organize an army, for which purpose he went to Germany, brought back eighteen hundred non-commissioned officers to Mexico, and with their help, plus a sprinkling of Irish officers, he proceeded to wipe the floor with Obregon.

General Corrigan was a man who didn't mince words. England, in his opinion, was going to the dogs. It needed a strong administration, his conception of which was possibly colored by a somewhat tropical temperament. The chief needs of the hour, according to his diagnosis of the situation, were the expulsion of all the Jews, the imposition of heavy tariffs on all imports, and the tranquil negotiation of labor by machine guns. In his country, for instance, it had been found advisable to hang up a number of Americans by their "bloody thombs."

As Minister for Foreign Affairs he had come to England in order to arrange sundry business deals involving millions of pounds and to meet such representative politicians in this country as Mr. Lloyd George, Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, and Mr. Asquith. He dismissed all these gentlemen with an oath or

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two, though he admitted to a partiality for the Prince of Wales.

His listener, who had already become interested in his intriguing personality and who felt that a pen-portrait of a typical British statesman by the less sophisticated statesman of a warmer clime might be valuable, pressed him for details concerning Mr. Asquith.

After a slight pause, due no doubt to a justifiable feeling that Mr. Asquith was very small beer in comparison with himself, General Corrigan obliged him by bellowing what follows:

“Ah went to lunch wid Asquit, Ah did, and he said to me, ‘Yes, young mon, you think politics is an easy game, eh? everything nice and simple, eh? but you’ve got a lot of difficulties ahead of you, young mon, you have—ah, yes.’ And he went on like that until Ah got bloody wild, Ah did, and Ah said to him ‘Mr. Asquit,’ Ah said, ‘all you need is a bonnet on yer head and a petticoat round yer legs, and you’d make a bloody fine old woman, you would.’ ”

General Corrigan glared at his listener and was silent. But the latter, feeling that the story was not

quite complete, asked whether Mr. Asquith had found anything to say in reply to so comprehensive a criticism of his qualities. The General looked a little uncomfortable, but after a short pause supplied the finishing touch to the sympathetic scene:

"Asquit said: 'General Corrigan, that remark might be misinterpreted as rudeness.'"

The fact that General Corrigan, though not naturally qualified to retain verbal felicities in their exact form, had carried Mr. Asquith's words in his memory, obviously without modifying a letter, proved that a product of Balliol remains master of the situation even when confronted by a product of "the bush."

His listener, previously a bit sceptical as to the veracity of the General's story, was instantly converted on hearing Mr. Asquith's remark, which so throbbed with verisimilitude that he could no longer question the substantial accuracy of the context in which it was handed to him.

This brief episode paints the late Lord Oxford to the life. If nothing else had ever been written about him, that single reply of his would have told us all we wanted to know, would have pictured

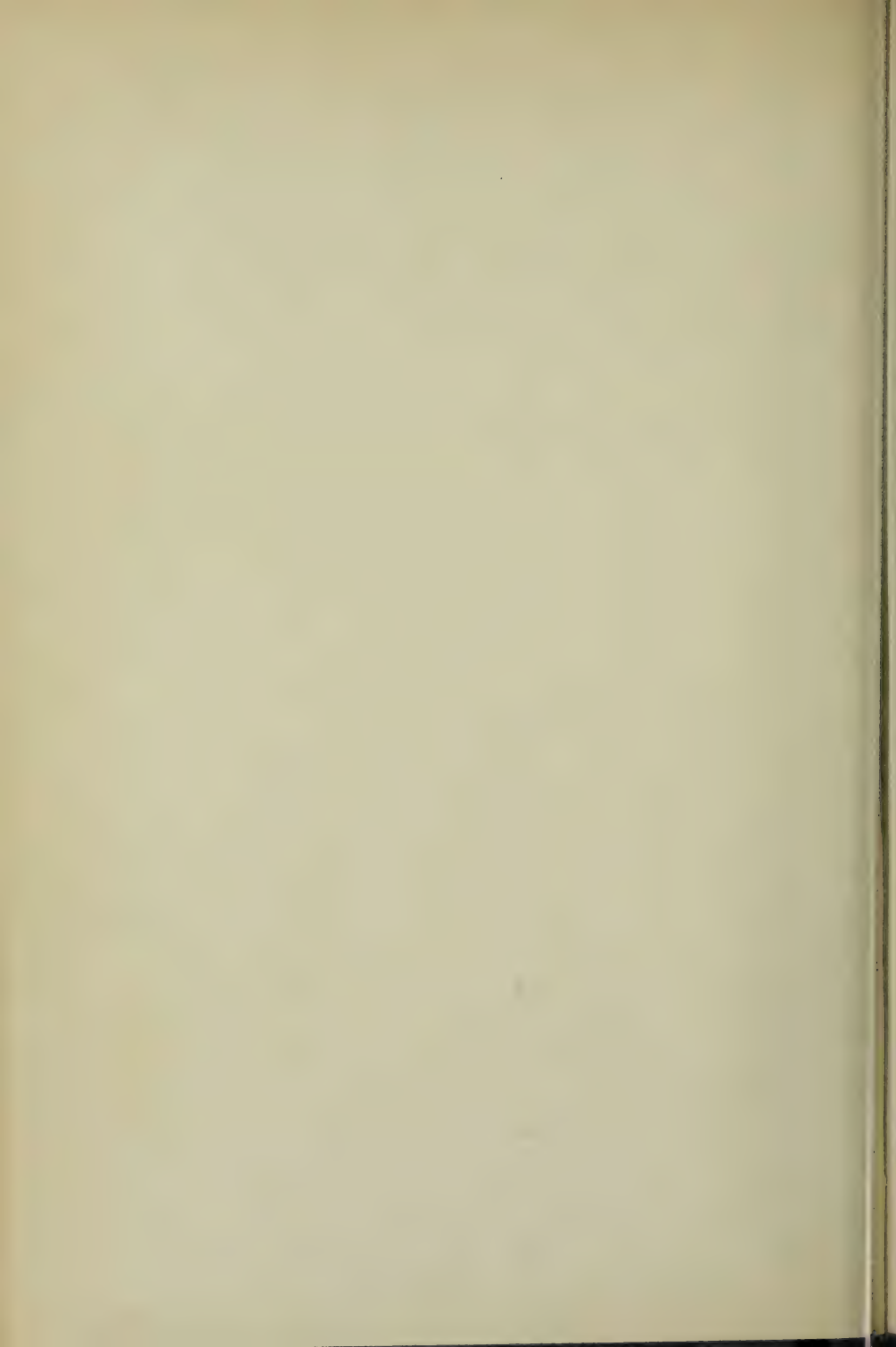
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inimitably his suave manner, his non-committal method, his diplomatic reserve, his detachment, his air of breeding, his prudent, studied phraseology.

There he is, almost all of him, potted for posterity in a phrase.

CHAPTER IV

Temperament in Biography



BRIEFLY summarized, then, the drawbacks to "personal" biography are that it cannot be impartial and that the more intimate it is the less complete it is. On the other hand its value lies in the fact that it furnishes the impersonal biographer with first-hand information, revealing anecdotes and admirable, if one-sided, portraiture—in short, the reminiscences of one or more people—all of which will help to round off and complete his finished and maybe final portrait.

Now let us consider the kind of mentality that is required to produce first-class biography of the impersonal sort, which of course is the biography of today and the biography of the future. For there will never be another Boswell. Modern life is all against such a phenomenon. But there will be plenty of folk fully competent to provide raw material for the artist-biographer, and any person who is keenly interested in human beings and capable of putting words on paper may do good work in this way, be

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he realist, satirist, humorist or even sentimentalist in temperament and outlook.

But what of the detached artist-biographer, the synthetic portrait-painter, the imaginative yet scientific writer, who will re-create by a process of selection and arrangement the real characters who may be living among us at this very moment? What will he be like? What literary and intellectual virtues must he possess? These are interesting questions, because there can be little doubt now that biography is to be the leading literary art of the future and will attract the best writers and some of the best brains among our successors. Already one perceives the movement towards biography in modern fiction. Novels are becoming more and more concerned with the lives and times of their heroes. Galsworthy is the biographer of the Forsytes and the historiographer of their period.

It must be said at once that the man who can write a great novel is not necessarily capable of writing a great biography. More than any other literary art, biography calls for a special sort of outlook and temperament in the practitioner. Beyond and above anything else he must be intensely interested in men

and women for their own sakes. He must not be concerned with life, but with *a* life. His business is not with humanity, but with separate human beings. It is not his job to point a moral, but to adorn a tale. Therefore, though he may be a most estimable man in his own social circle, though he may conform to all the conventions as rigidly as a Nonconformist, for the purposes of his biography he must be entirely non-moral in outlook and treatment.

Now it so happens that we have been passing through a rather trying transitional stage in the domain of morals. This has been reflected in our literature, and all our leading writers of the past thirty years have concerned themselves with the problems of human destiny, neglecting the complexities of human character. Their best energies were directed towards the social questions of their epoch. As a consequence, the fiction and drama of the age that is already drawing to a close have been mainly devoted to ideas, not human beings, and biography as an art was practically non-existent during the literary period dominated by Shaw, Wells, Chesterton, Galsworthy and the rest.

That literary period terminated with the war of

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1914, and the new age opened with the advent (and portent) of Lytton Strachey in 1918. Human beings are now being studied, as they were in the eighteenth century, by the best writers of the time. Already we have a school of biographers who are displacing the dramatists and novelists of pre-war days. No young dramatists are prepared to step into the shoes of Shaw and Galsworthy, no modern novelists seem able to take the places of Wells and Bennett, no post-war essayists are in the same street with Chesterton and Belloc. It is the day of the biographer; he is the dramatist, the essayist, the romancist of the future.

So strongly has our non-moral interest in human personality been aroused since the war—due largely, no doubt, to the craze for psycho-analysis, the failing hold of religion, a general scepticism as to the value of social and political reform, and a whole-hearted disbelief in the sincerity and public spirit of our rulers—that we cannot help wondering whether we would not willingly exchange all the novels and dramas and essays of the Edwardian era for half a dozen good biographies by its leading spirits.

Which brings us back to the question: what liter-

ary and intellectual virtues must the good biographer possess? Will the leading literary lights of the future, most of whom will be biographers, at all resemble the leading literary lights of today, most of whom are novelists and playwrights? Which suggests another question: could the Edwardians have written first-rate biography, even if they had wanted to?

Let me examine the temperaments of the six writers I have named, using them as illustrations for my view of what should and what should not constitute the ideal biographical temperament. Probably we shall find that, on the whole, their several attitudes to life will show us what should be avoided rather than copied by the biographers who will take their places and mold the spirit of the coming age.

I will begin with Mr. H. G. Wells, who did once debase the art of biography for the purpose of propaganda. The briefest sketch of his literary activities will place him before us a perfect model of the type of man who can be relied upon to produce the worst possible type of biography.

He started well, tickling the public palate with two popular and wholesome literary dishes, which

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had already been served up with triumphant success by Jules Verne and Charles Dickens. The Dickensian Wells would indeed have Boswellized admirably. "Polly" and "Kipps" prove that, at least in early manhood, he could have done some excellent first-hand portraiture.

But from a biographical point of view his declension was sudden and devastating. He became pragmatical, absorbed in social affairs, a man with a mission, a salvationist, and a Fabian. It was as a Fabian that he suffered his first serious set-back. There was another Richard in the field, who had got there before him, and whose name was Shaw. This was irritating. Indeed it was intolerable. The presence of a Webb or two was immaterial. For, after all, what was Webb? A plodding statistician, a true follower of Fabius Maximus, who probably earned the name "Cunctator" because he was web-footed.

But the presence of Shaw was quite a different matter. It therefore became necessary to leave the Fabians, and, since his mood was becoming more and more messianic, to gain his own disciples in another field. The circulating libraries spoke to

more people than Fabian lectures; so his messianic energies were speedily devoted to Mudie's.

The whole of his immense energy was now put to the trade of turning out novels as fast as they could be printed. The sworn friends of yesterday became the sworn-at acquaintances of today. His restless mind probed every department of human knowledge, every field of human experience, every sphere of human achievement. He pondered upon the Nature of God and upon the Nature of Man.

Suddenly, as in a revelation, it came to him that he alone could "justify the ways of God to men." Thereupon he wrote several works in which the present position of the Creator was made clear. His admirers were delighted to learn that the Deity, after a few false starts, was now definitely modelling Himself on H. G. Wells.

Not content with this exegetical feat, he turned to the history of mankind, in the hope that it would be possible to justify the ways of men to God. He found that nothing whatever could justify them. But to mark his own significance still more clearly, he wrote a universal history, in which he classified

great men according to their resemblance to himself. The result was a small list of unfamiliar names.

All his life he had been dwelling on the necessity of an education in which co-operation should take the place of competition in the school curriculum. A friend of his, Sanderson of Oundle, had tried to put these ideas into practice, and after his death Mr. Wells wrote a book about him. The most interesting thing in this book was the contempt with which Mr. Wells referred to the "official" biography of Sanderson, a work which happened to be a co-operative undertaking, thus symbolizing the very ideals for which Sanderson had fought.

It must not therefore be inferred that Mr. Wells was indifferent to those ideals. That would be a grave error. There were different *kinds* of co-operation. There was, no doubt, the co-operation of other people among themselves. But there was also the co-operation of Mr. Wells with himself.

Perhaps it is not necessary to add that his two leading characteristics—self-obsession and moral earnestness—are the bane of biography.

The writer who is so often and so inappropriately coupled with Mr. Wells has many temperamental

affinities with our ideal biographer. Mr. Arnold Bennett has no political axe to grind, no belief in Utopia, no belief in God (either visible or invisible), no panacea for cosmic diseases. He is a keen observer of men, and would be of women if only he didn't confuse their skirts with their souls. He has a detached, though a trifle pontifical, view of people and things; and, within limits, human eccentricity, which is the blood and bones of biography, appeals to him. Above all, he subscribes to no "ism," and usually manages to extract quite a lot of fun out of the Ismists (the word needs coining) who plague the world with their dogmas.

He seems to take a delight in remaining neutral. Once a downright fellow of my acquaintance was lunching with him at the Reform Club. The subject of atheism was raised and Mr. Bennett wondered whether there were any serious atheists in the world. His guest was very positive on the point and gave chapter and verse for his opinions; but after each of his assertions Mr. Bennett kept repeating:

"I wonder"—or some such expression.

At length the other broke out:

"The more proofs I advance, the more sceptical

you become. Is there nothing I can say that will convince you?"

"I might be convinced," replied Mr. Bennett, "if you weren't so anxious to convince me."

That is Mr. Bennett all over. He thoroughly distrusts enthusiasm.

My own impression of him, gathered from his writings in general is that his life has been directed throughout by a loathing of middle class Nonconformity and a complementary passion for luxury, smartness and stylishness. Against this it might be urged that he treats his early surroundings very sympathetically in his Five-Town novels, and especially in "The Old Wive's Tale." But this seems to me a direct result of his passion for everything French. His literary masters are Flaubert and de Maupassant; and after reading them he suddenly saw that his early life had provided him with splendid material for novels written after the French formula.

None of his novels, in consequence, is quite spontaneous. Had he written as he felt, instead of cultivating an artificial and purely literary approval of the Five Towns as an artistic phenomenon, he might

have given the world a really remarkable denunciation of Nonconformist religiosity. His love for Dostoievski is very significant, and witnesses to a secret discontent with his gospel of efficiency and worldly success.

But what has hurt him as a novelist might have made him as a biographer. The following incident illustrates his curiously objective attitude towards life. It was given me by a lady who knows him well (we will call her Mrs. N) and though I have written it from memory, it may be taken as true in substance.

Mrs. N was chatting with him in the drawing-room of a Brighton hotel. His wife, a vivacious French lady, was entertaining a number of acquaintances with much gusto at the far end of the same room. Her laughter and high-spirited conversation were not lost on her husband, who interrupted Mrs. N's remarks with:

"Quaint, isn't she?"

Mrs. N stopped in the middle of the sentence, noted the direction of Mr. Bennett's glance, and signified that Mrs. Bennett was undoubtedly "quaint."

Their conversation continued. Another of Mrs.

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Bennett's bright comments reached their ears, and this time Mr. Bennett paused during one of his own sentences to observe:

"D'you hear that? Wasn't it droll?"

Mrs. N agreed that it was "droll."

Their talk rolled easily on, until a further spasm of merriment caused Mr. Bennett to interpolate:

"Quite a whimsical creature!"

Mrs. N adumbrated a response in the affirmative and continued the discussion. But she had not got very far before Mrs. Bennett's versatility had drawn the following apostrophe from her husband:

"A singular combination of oddity and charm!"

Mrs. N couldn't help admitting that Mrs. Bennett was unquestionably "a singular combination of oddity and charm," adding, in case Mr. Bennett might feel constrained to repeat it, that she was both droll and whimsical.

Mr. Bennett turned thoughtful eyes upon his companion, nodded his head, and indulged in a further instalment of their desultory discourse. But a shout of delight from the group surrounding Mrs. Bennett brought her husband's head round with a jerk and caused him to exclaim:

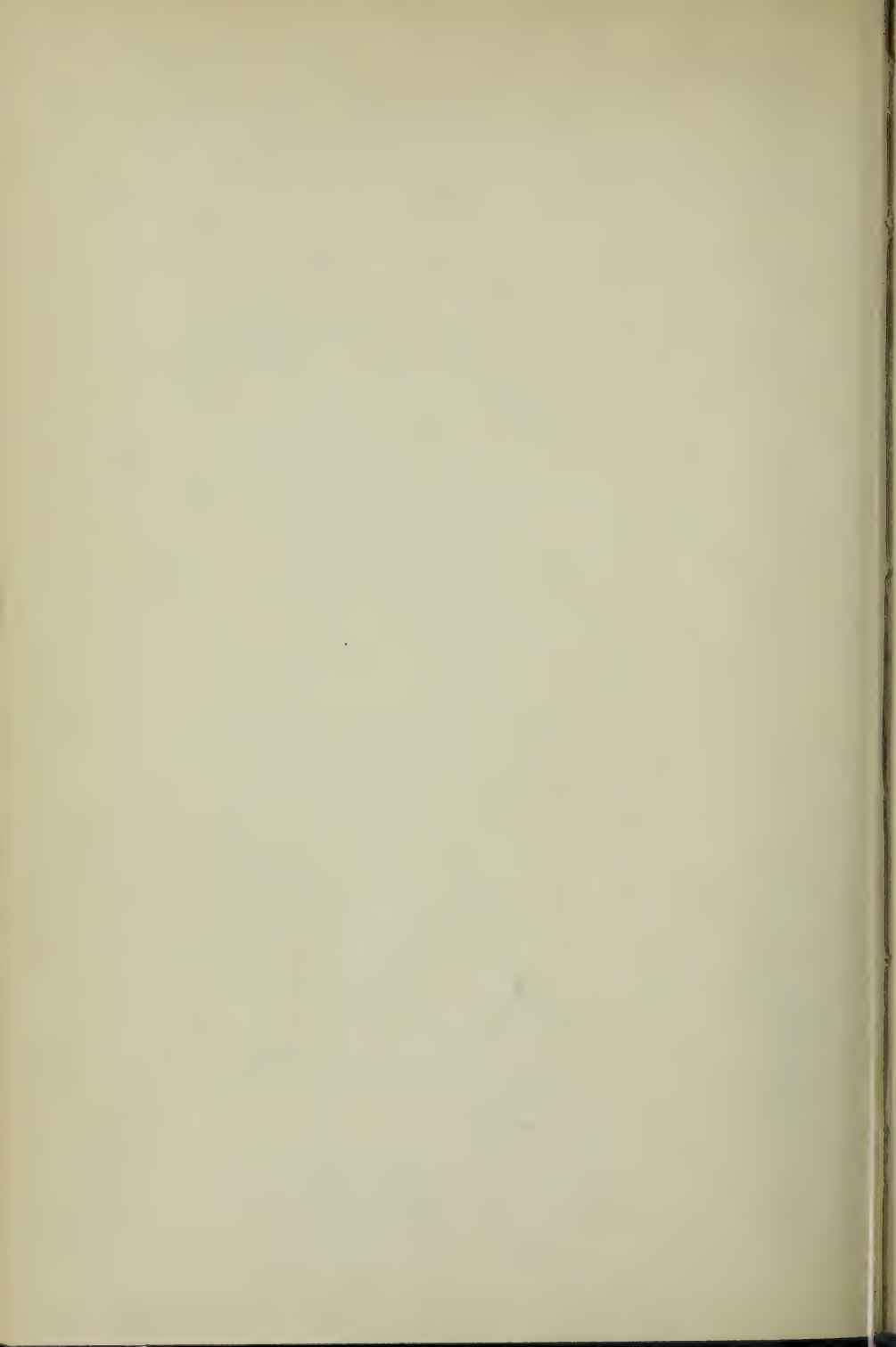
"Such a change from the rest!"

And a minute or two later:

"That's good! Ha, ha, ha!"

Mrs. N confessed that Mrs. Bennett was, beyond dispute, "a change from the rest"; also that her last remark was decidedly "good." By this time, however, she had lost the thread of their argument, and resigned herself to a course of illuminating ejaculations by Mr. Bennett concerning Mrs. Bennett.

It is clear, I think, that the world has lost a first-rate biographer in Mr. Bennett.



CHAPTER V

Didacticism in Biography

"I DON'T take the slightest interest in Literature with a capital 'L'," Shaw once told me; "I am a prophet, not a fancier."

Which explains why Shaw could never write a good biography. The born biographer is enormously interested in Literature with a capital "L" and in Art with a capital "A." In fact he doesn't take the slightest interest in prophecy, except in so far as it reveals the personality of the prophet.

In the case of Shaw, for instance, the biographer would note with interest that nowadays prophets are made by degrees, not born on the instant. In the old days revelations, we are incredibly informed, used to come in a flash and converts were made simultaneously. But modern conditions appear to be unfavorable to these miraculous metamorphoses. Instead of hearing epigrammatic instructions from the firmament, one has to study the prolix economists. In this way did Bernard Shaw receive the Message from Marx.

We will return to Mr. Shaw in a moment. The

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point I wish to press home here is that anyone who writes biography with any purpose at the back of his mind other than a human or intellectual interest in the subject is a bad biographer. This needs expansion and emphasis.

A person who writes a political biography with the object of advertising a political creed is a bad biographer. A person who writes a military biography with the object of glorifying the profession of arms is a bad biographer. A person who writes the biography of an imperialist with the object of exalting the Empire is a bad biographer. A person who writes the biography of a clergyman or a saint or a virtuous man with the object of praising religion or making converts or honoring virtue is a bad biographer. A person who writes biography with any object whatever except that of portraying character and telling the story of a life is a bad biographer.

There must be no ulterior motive in biography. All biographies that are intentionally religious, instructional and didactic are bad biographies. The moment propaganda appears in any shape or form, true biography disappears. Special pleading, par-

tisanship, moral condemnation, palliation, any emotion that may affect the writer, is antagonistic to good biography and in the long run vitiates it.

I would even go so far as to say that it is against the pure spirit of biography to bring it under the heading of a "Series," however admirable certain individual contributions to that series may be. My reason being that a "Series" suggests a link between each work appearing under it, which suggests further that a definite type of work must be compiled to suit the heading, which again is bad for biography.

Makers of the Empire do not necessarily make good subjects for biography. An editor or a publisher may regard a score of people as Curiosities of Politics, but it's a bad beginning for those who contribute to the sequence; they will be searching for what is curious rather than for what is characteristic. And the writers of the English Men of Letters series are fairly certain to pay more attention to the Letters than to the Men. Besides, the idea at the back of any "Series" is instructional; and biography is an art, not a lesson.

Which brings us back to Bernard Shaw, one of

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whose pet beliefs is that if literature doesn't teach it is worthless. For this reason he has no use for Shakespeare, who taught nothing—or, if you like it better, everything. I mean that we can all get out of Shakespeare what we take to him.

For example, Sir Sidney Lee, a man of business, laid stress on Shakespeare's business acumen; Frank Harris, a confessed sensualist, made Shakespeare a sensualist; Bernard Shaw, a social reformer, would have us believe that Shakespeare was agitated by the social problems of his period. And so on and so forth. In short, Shakespeare was an artist, and therefore remains a source of perpetual irritation to the puritans and propagandists who admire a man with a clear, clean-cut message, an uplifting philosophy of life, and all the rest of the canting twaddle that no self-respecting artist will stand at any price.

While on the subject I might add that Shakespeare had every single quality of the ideal biographer. He had all the vitality of the enthusiast with none of his enthusiasms. And his creative instinct would have urged him to make a scrap-heap of mere facts and get right down to the truth beneath them. Unlike Bernard Shaw, who would sacrifice

everything for the facts, though the artist in him has occasionally triumphed over them.

There have indeed been moments in Shaw's career when the oppressive reality of life has not lain too heavily upon him, when he has been beguiled by a fleeting interest in human personality. One such moment produced his most perfect play, "Caesar and Cleopatra," his only entirely successful essay in dramatic biography.

At such rare moments of recreation certain people, myself among others, have managed to coax from him a few pages of autobiography, a few paragraphs of contemporary portraiture. These pages and paragraphs contain some of the best first-hand biographical work of the time, and convince me that Shaw could write one of the greatest autobiographies in the world. He'll never do so, of course, but I'm sure he could if he wanted to.

Being by nature a creative artist, though he has wilfully flung his art into the cauldron of propaganda, his portraits of contemporaries are largely imaginative. But, for that matter, every literary portrait of value is and must be an imaginative portrait. That is to say, it is written from a certain angle—

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the angle of the author—and its subject can only be seen from his peculiar point of view. Also the conversations Shaw has recorded in his reminiscences are creative; he has captured the spirit of them and not bothered himself about the letter. In a word he has mastered the right approach to first-hand biography.

He has gone further than this. In two parts of his play "Back to Methuselah" he has introduced the late Lord Oxford and Mr. Lloyd George under the names of Burge and Lubin, and immortalized them by ridicule. He had already done this with several public men in another play, "Press Cuttings," which shows that he is no respecter of persons, and in that single respect has a sound biographical temperament.

So far so good. But when I did the same kind of thing in my book, "Modern Men and Mummies," he hauled me over the coals for "bad manners." He informed me that Gerald Cumberland had published a book about living people with just my "recklessness," as he called it. (As a matter of fact, most of my subjects were dead.)

"The result was," continued Shaw, "that his next

work was so ruthlessly boycotted by the reviewers that both the writer and his publisher appealed to me—one of his victims—to say a word for him in public!”

I waited for more. It came.

“The more candidly you criticize, the more delicately you must draw the line between what may be said and what may not. In short, your manners must be as good as your brains if you are to make good your claim to criticize. You must give your man the republican respect that is due to him before you pull his work to pieces. And all criticism of his conduct must start from that basis. Nothing is worse than a sneer, even though it may not incur damages.”

All this was perfectly sound, but I pointed out that I had done nothing worse than poke fun at pomposity and pretentiousness, and that where respect was due I had given it. I added further that a man's personality is so closely bound up with his public actions that criticism of the one frequently implies criticism of the other. To judge a man's actions one must know the man. When Tolstoy shunned the world and deserted his family with that nobility

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of renunciation so characteristic of major prophets, his attitude could only be explained and the value of his teaching estimated by reference to his past, which, judged by his later standards, left much to be desired.

Mr. Shaw allowed the subject to drop, but I could see that his real objection to my method was that it differed from his. There was a purposeful social satire behind his work, while mine was simply the result of an impersonal interest in my characters—it savored too much of art for art's sake.

But there is about Shaw a sort of inhuman humanity that would have prevented him from writing great biography, even if his art hadn't been arrested by the social problems of his age. Kindly he is, but there is something killing in his kindliness. Callous he seems, but there is an admirable sanity in his lack of feeling. He is of the earth, but not earthy; of men, but beyond them. He has a niche to himself—apart from the philosophers, yet with them; apart from the reformers and humanitarians, yet with them; apart from the artists, yet with them too. He is perhaps the only example in history of the superman in the street.

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Perhaps that is why he would make such a bad subject for a biography. It is certainly why he could never have written a good biography on any subject.

Shaw has told us a great deal about himself in one place or another. But when we turn to Mr. Galsworthy we come up against the stark fact that we know practically nothing whatever about him. In an age of self-advertisement it is strange to find one of our leading writers almost entirely unadvertised. He reached his position quietly, unobtrusively, without the tumult and the shouting that have accompanied the progress to fame of Shaw, Wells, Chesterton and company.

Yet Mr. Galsworthy, too, is a propagandist, a man with a message. How, then, has he managed to "arrive" without trumpets and without the assistance of a clique? Well, for one thing, he has never attempted to found a new faith or to rekindle the dying embers of an old one; his message must be read between the lines. For another, he was born a member of the great commercial Middle Class, so despised by writers who were born a little beneath it. This last fact is most significant. He has behaved throughout as a member of that class is expected to

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behave. In modern letters he has represented that class to perfection. The Forsyte Saga is its epic; he is its genius, its biographer, its poet.

The writing of fiction and the writing of biography are, however, two very different things. One can say quite a lot in fiction without losing caste; but biography—the unveiled truth—is dangerous ground. Even Mr. Gosse had to publish “Father and Son” anonymously. No; the Edwardians had sufficient of the old Victorian respectability about them to feel nervous of the naked truth. So Mr. Galsworthy hid the truth he had to tell under the mask of fiction.

Yet he had the makings of a great biographer in him. He could see both sides of a question with admirable lucidity, and he has shown keen understanding of people with whom he could have had little in common. Had it not been for the class to which he belonged, and the age in which his genius found expression, he might have done better work on a canvas of real life than any other writer of his time, or indeed, with the exception of Mr. Strachey, of our own time. What is the Forsyte Saga but the biography of Soames Forsyte?

No two writers could be less alike than John Galsworthy and Frank Harris. Everything that the first is, the second isn't, and vice versa. Frank Harris, having none of Mr. Galsworthy's inhibitions, wrote the most outspoken biography in the English language. But that is not my sole reason for mentioning him here. It so happens that I am able to report, with as reasonable a regard for accuracy as a published account by Harris and my own knowledge of the two writers will permit, a scene between the creator of *Soames Forsyte* and the biographer of Oscar Wilde which depicts both of them to the life.

It took place in a New York hotel, shortly after the war. Mr. Galsworthy was lecturing in America, and sitting in his hotel one day he received a message that Frank Harris would like to see him.

For the sake of those who haven't met Frank Harris or read his books, a word or two about him will help their appreciation of the episode I have to recount. He is one of those (there are quite a number) who regard the existence of the great English commercial Middle Class as a personal affront. It flouts the dignity of the democracy from which he sprang. It does not produce great artists. It is reason-

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ably refined, polite, moderate; it doesn't swear; and, in fact, it possesses to the *n*th degree of irritation all the more vicious virtues. Above all, it glorifies sport at the expense of sex.

Now Harris believes in the inspirational value of love with all his heart and with all his soul. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that he believes in nothing else. In his opinion, no great work was ever produced except under the direct influence of sexual desire. If you don't itch with longing for someone or other, you can't possibly write a masterpiece. That is the *sine qua non* of Harris's faith. No love, no poem. No passion, no art. No desire, no anything. Love is the "forcing-house" of genius. We owe all the greatest works of all the greatest writers to the fortunate fact that every single one of them was enslaved by carnal appetite. *Sic itur ad astra*.

Lust springs eternal in the human breast; concupiscence makes the world go round. The man who isn't passion-driven is the prey of perversion. The greatest imaginable tragedy is the death of desire. *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

There is a moving passage in his Autobiography wherein Harris describes how the tears welled to

his eyes and rolled down his cheeks when first he beheld a pretty girl who failed to provoke his passion. *Sic Harris!*

Unfortunately, Mr. Galsworthy had not been primed with these facts when he said to the messenger:

"Tell Mr. Harris I shall be delighted to see him, and beg him to come to my room."

The votary of Venus sped upwards in an elevator; and before Mr. Galsworthy had recovered from the shock of being told, in the deepest and most expansive chest-notes he had ever heard, that he had said "a memorable word or two" in his lecture, he found himself in the midst of a discussion on Bolshevism.

Mr. Harris intimated that he expected great things of Russia. (It was not, one must remember, a revolution of the English commercial Middle Class.)

"This Communist state that they are building up over there"—Mr. Harris pointed in the direction of Fifth Avenue—"holds out a new hope to humanity. I am thrilled by the promise of it. Holy Russia!—as her children call her—may she not yet found the United States of Europe?"

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Mr. Galsworthy didn't feel at all confident on the point, so held his peace.

"Cannot you see the beacon-light?" pursued Mr. Harris.

Apparently Mr. Galsworthy couldn't, on the spur of the moment, spot the beacon-light. He smiled and shook his head.

"We mortals crown our greatest with thorns," mused Mr. Harris.

Mr. Galsworthy was trying hard to discern the relevance of the last remark, when Mr. Harris confused the issue still further with another:

"It will call a new ideal into life, an ideal that will not find consummation in rich viands, vintage wines, and scented cigars."

Mr. Galsworthy wondered vaguely whether the last remark had reference to the cigar he had just offered Mr. Harris, but noting that the latter appeared to be enjoying it, he contented himself with a soothing monosyllable:

"Quite," said Mr. Galsworthy.

His visitor paused, surveyed him carefully, and asked him whether he liked America.

"Very much," Mr. Galsworthy confessed.

"That may mean anything," objected Mr. Harris slowly.

"No; it means 'very much,'" affirmed Mr. Galsworthy.

"Ah!" from Mr. Harris.

"And you?" enquired the famous novelist; "do you like it? I imagine you must, or you wouldn't stay here."

"I am an American," said Mr. Harris, with all the fierceness of a man whose nationality is in dispute, "and I am at home in the flesh if not in the spirit."

"Then why not live where your spirit is at home?"

"France!" cried Mr. Harris rapturously: "Dear France! The heart of her is warm, the soul noble. France is my spiritual home. I shall write my autobiography there."

"Oh?" said Mr. Galsworthy with interest; "are you going to write your autobiography? That will be a treat in store for us."

Mr. Harris smiled grimly.

"I shall describe Love," said he, "as that Goddess Divine has never been described before."

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A pause. Then he finished the sentence with a shout:

“Naked and unashamed!”

“Really?” was the polite but slightly diffident rejoinder of the Englishman.

“I will paint the ecstasy of passion,” Mr. Harris went on, “and the intoxicating bliss of Love’s golden-glorious hours.”

He paused again, and Mr. Galsworthy interjected a reluctant:

“Oh!”

“In my book,” continued Mr. Harris, “no puritan drapery shall hide the loveliness of limbs and the beauty of breasts. I shall paint them to the life—” (Mr. Harris searched for the right word, while Mr. Galsworthy held his breath, and found it:)—“voluptuous-nude!”

The last two words were sent forth in a tone of challenge; and Mr. Galsworthy made a sound in his throat, which might have been taken in any sense.

Suddenly the autobiographer remembered the object of his visit.

“What are you writing now?” he asked.

"A novel," said Mr. Galsworthy.

"Then you are in love again," probed Mr. Harris eagerly.

(At this point I must interrupt the scene and inform any miserably unenlightened person who has not had the privilege of reading Mr. Harris's "Contemporary Portraits," 5 vols., that he never missed an opportunity of asking all the famous people he met in the course of his life for a detailed history of their most intimate love-affairs.)

"I am always in love," said Mr. Galsworthy with a gentle smile.

"Ah, but a new novel means a new love, the birth of some new passion," cried Mr. Harris.

"Indeed?" from Mr. Galsworthy courteously.

"In thought and in deed," replied Mr. Harris with a satirical gleam in his eyes; "otherwise you would repeat yourself."

"One love, if it be deep and true enough, can inspire many stories," said Mr. Galsworthy.

Frank Harris smiled pityingly upon him and remarked:

"What an Englishman you are!"

"Yes," said Mr. Galsworthy apologetically, "I suppose I am."

By this time Harris had completely lost interest in his companion. A man who practically admitted that he had only once been in love could never be expected to create anything new. But he remembered in time that Galsworthy belonged to the English Middle Class, and his hope for humanity was instantly renewed.

Quite frankly, Mr. Galsworthy had not been at all easy during the foregoing colloquy, and was rather relieved when it came to an end. He was not fond of being catechized under any circumstances, and there was something jarring in Harris's assumption that one had to be a philanderer in order to be an artist. He came to the conclusion that Frank Harris did not like his work, and it is possible that, on the whole, he was rather thankful.

Frank Harris's pre-occupation with matters of sex has, however, had one good result. A courageous biography of Wilde badly needed writing, and no one who knew him, with the single exception of Harris, would have had the pluck or ability or wish to do it honestly. It is true that Harris's book is

marred throughout by partisanship, by his perpetual railing against English puritanism, hypocrisy, and legal procedure—all of which should have been ironically exposed, not scornfully attacked. But with every allowance for its lack of detachment in this respect, his “Wilde” is an extremely valuable addition to biographical literature, and, excepting only Boswell’s “Johnson,” quite the best intimate portrait in the language.

In one sense his work is even better than Boswell’s. It goes deeper; it is more intimate, more outspoken, more ruthless. But it fails entirely where Boswell is most successful. Wilde is not made *familiar* to us as Johnson is. Which is merely another way of saying that Harris has not created a character; he has only revealed certain characteristics.

For some perhaps not wholly unaccountable reason, Harris, at the age of seventy, produced what he called a New Preface to his “Life of Wilde,” which had been written at the age of fifty-five. This was issued in England, where however the “Life” has not so far been published.

In the New Preface he saw fit to contradict a

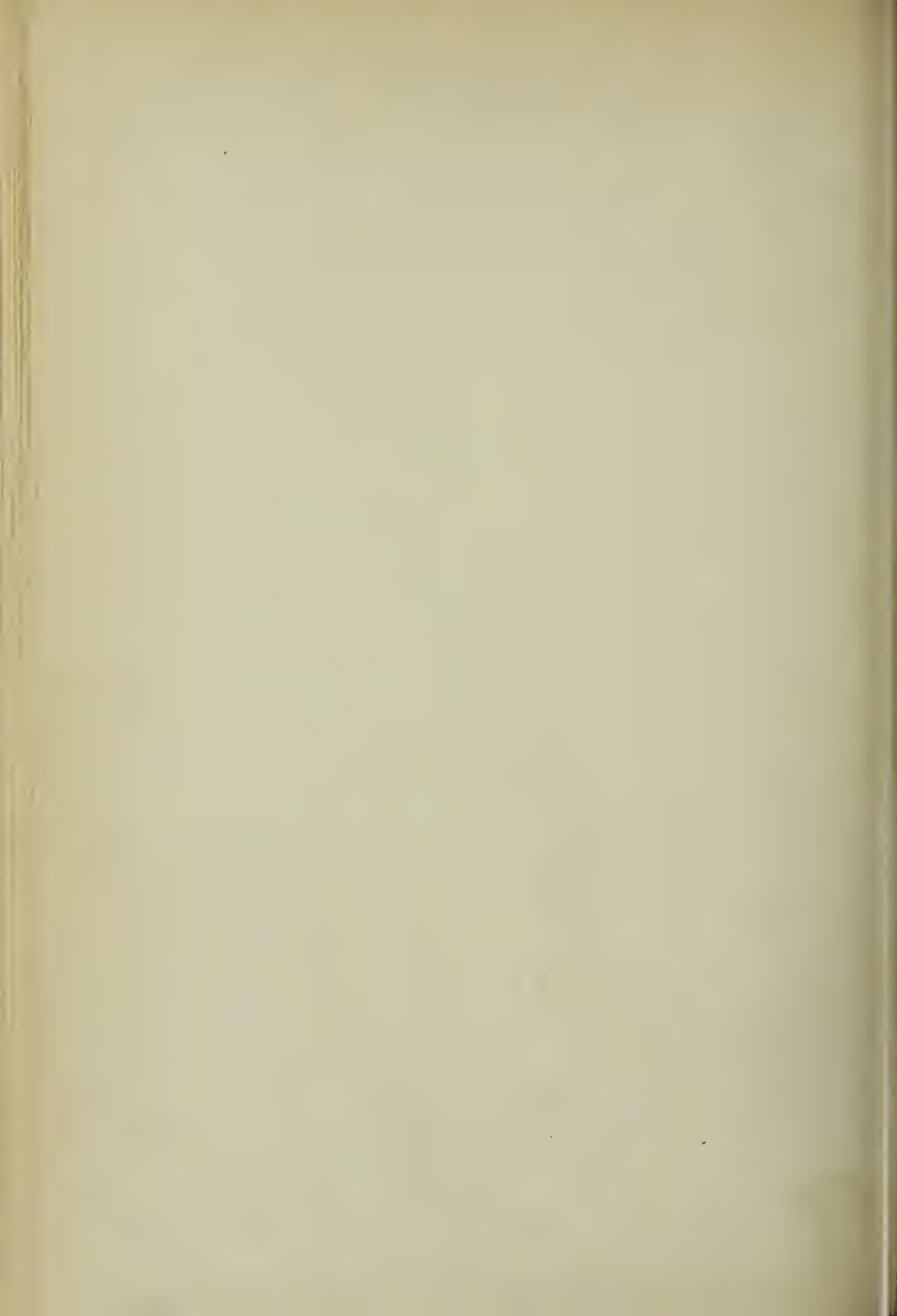
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number of important statements which he had made in the "Life." But it may interest those of my readers who admire his biography of Wilde to know that he has since written a Newer Preface, in which he explains how the New Preface came to be written and withdraws about fifty per cent of the "contradictions" contained in it.

Since the Newer Preface, he has also produced a Newest Preface, in which he withdraws everything that he said in the New Preface. The original work therefore stands exactly as it was first published; and I have copies of the Newer and Newest Prefaces, which, to satisfy the curiosity of bibliographers, will no doubt some day see the light.

CHAPTER VI

Religion in Biography



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MR. HAROLD NICOLSON says a very wise thing in his book on British biography. This:

“So long as the intellect is undisturbed by emotion you have good biography. The moment, however, that any emotion (such as reverence, affection, ethical desires, religious belief) intrudes upon the composition of a biography, that biography is doomed. Of all such emotions religious earnestness is the most fatal to pure biography. Not only does it carry with it all the vices of hagiography (the desire to prove a case, to depict an example—the sheer perversion, for such purposes, of fact), but it disinterests the biographer in his subject. A deep belief in a personal deity destroys all deep belief in the unconquerable personality of man.”

I would go much further than this. I would say (have already said) that any form of moral earnestness, any ethical standpoint whatever, is fatal to the art of biography. Some of Mr. Nicolson's own work has been disabled by a tendency to moralize. He speaks severely of Lord Tennyson's fallow years

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—perhaps nothing that Tennyson wrote makes us respect him more than the fact that for ten years he wrote nothing—and in Mr. Nicolson's book on Verlaine we have a most surprising piece of self-revelation.

There is a delicious story of Verlaine during his final phase, in which he obtains five francs for a poem, but returns the next day to say that it was a bad piece. The clerk apologizes and gives him another. Verlaine thanks him and begins to leave.

"But what about the five-franc piece we gave you yesterday?" calls the clerk after him.

"Oh, that," shouts back Verlaine, "as I have already so carefully explained, was a *bad* piece. You can't imagine what difficulty I had in disposing of it!"

Mr. Nicolson records this story and then remarks: "Such stories could be multiplied without number, and are only too characteristic of the period." One wishes that instead of dismissing these stories with an "only too characteristic," he had given a few more of them. The fashionable moral standards of our biographers are all liable to become old-fashioned.

Of course I realize that criticism of action can be implied in the bare relation of action. But no biographer should go further than that. And, fortunately, such indirect criticism, or criticism by implication, can always be taken in two or more ways. Whenever a biographer delivers himself of a definite moral judgment, he commits an unforgivable sin against his art.

However, I am with Mr. Nicolson whole-mindedly on the subject of religious belief. It usually has the most disastrous effect on biography—more disastrous, if possible, than the effect of wifely devotion on truth whenever wives write about their husbands.

Turn to the controversial biographies of Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Belloc if you wish to see religion's injurious influence at its worst. (By the way, that phrase "controversial biography" is really a contradiction in terms. No proper biography is controversial in tone. But Mr. Chesterton's and Mr. Belloc's biographies are highly improper from the standpoint of art.)

I will begin with Mr. Chesterton, who is himself such an admirable subject for the biographer that I will first Boswellize him and then explain why he

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should never have practised the art of Boswell. What follows may not be quite accurate, but it is probably more true to life than what actually took place, because the memory aided by a knowledge of the man is a better guide to truth than the note-book aided by a knowledge of Pitman.

"One should always," said Mr. Chesterton, "drink port from a tankard."

His disciple coughed nervously, feebly fingered the slender stem of his glass, and intimated that he was in cordial agreement with the great man's sentiment.

"Because," continued Mr. Chesterton, "one does not like to see that one is coming to the end of it."

His disciple was understood to mutter "Exactly!"

"Also," pursued Mr. Chesterton, "it takes on a richer hue in a tankard."

"You are right," adumbrated his disciple.

"Also," went on Mr. Chesterton, "it has a mellower taste."

"Undoubtedly," came the enthusiastic response.

"Besides," said Mr. Chesterton, "one can *grasp* a tankard."

"Ye-es."

"And *drain* it."

"Of c-course," was the timid assent.

"Now one can't *drain* a glass."

"N-no," faintly.

"What did you say?" demanded Mr. Chesterton.

"I said 'no.'"

"To what?"

"I was agreeing with you."

"Which remark of mine did you agree with?"

"That one can't drain a glass."

"Why can't one?"

"Well, you said so."

"I say so again,"—and Mr. Chesterton banged the counter—"I go on saying so."

A troubled look came into the disciple's face. He opened his mouth with the intention of backing up the master's statement, but he suddenly remembered the consequences of his last affirmation, and shut it again before it was too late.

"Why can't one drain a glass?" persisted Mr. Chesterton.

But his disciple refused to be caught again. He nodded his head diagonally and said nothing.

"Because," said Mr. Chesterton, "one can only *sip* a glass."

The disciple almost formed the words, "Quite so," but he had enough strength of mind to leave them unuttered.

"That is all *you* have been doing," said Mr. Chesterton; "you have been *sipping* your glass."

The situation was becoming delicate. A personal accusation required careful handling. But the disciple remained firm. He contented himself with a smile; then, feeling that more was required of him, he gulped down the remainder of his port as a silent witness to his manhood.

His act of bravery was followed by a long and rather awkward silence.

"Glasses," remarked Mr. Chesterton at length, "glasses are made to be smashed."

The disciple was not prepared for this profound statement. He laughed outright. Thus encouraged, Mr. Chesterton proceeded:

"It is said that those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. But what man, living in a glass house, would do anything else? It is the simplest way of getting out of a glass house. Indeed,

if he throws a sufficient quantity of stones, it soon ceases to be a glass house."

A pause. His disciple was dimly wondering what all this had to do with port, when Mr. Chesterton observed:

"I do not need to look, but my other four senses tell me that there is no more port in this tankard of mine."

The disciple jumped at the opportunity this gave him of proving his masculinity. He instantly asked the barmaid for two tankards of port.

"No, no," interposed Mr. Chesterton; "it is my turn."

Then, turning to the barmaid, he corrected the order:

"One tankard of port for me, and one *glass* of port for this gentleman, please," said he, adding, with a glance at his disciple, "who is, by birth and training, a sipper."

I was the fortunate witness of this moving scene, which took place in the Cheshire Cheese on a summer afternoon in 1913. There was more of it, but what I have given here is an adequate snapshot of the pre-war Chesterton.

But how are the mighty fallen! Only a year or so ago I spotted the great man drinking a beverage that looked suspiciously like soda and milk in the restaurant at Marylebone station. He was alone and appeared to be enjoying his thoughts. "Can it be possible," I said to myself, "that he is taking pleasure in his drink, or is he merely making the most of his diet?" It crossed my mind that, had he been with a friend, he wouldn't have dared to sip a soda. But I banished the suspicion as unworthy, and, rubbing my eyes, closely scrutinized the white and watery substance in his glass.

My first glance was brutally confirmed. Still I refused to rely on the evidence of my eyes; so when the waitress came to my table I asked her if she had any objection to telling me what the stout gentleman in the corner was drinking. I am glad I did so, because that soda and milk would have haunted me for days. Also I was wrong—terribly, libellously wrong. I will never again trust my eyesight. And this, I hope, will be a warning to those who accept what is often called first-hand evidence, without attempting to get firster, or, better still,

firstest-hand evidence. For, in answer to my inquiry, the maid said:

"The gent is drinking 'Orlicks."

In the old days Mr. Chesterton was to the average person "obviously brilliant." But his real cleverness lay in the fact that he was brilliantly obvious. No man ever made the commonplace sound so witty. His paradoxes were, for the most part, platitudes. Yet a mere observation was transformed by his pen into something that read like sheer inspiration.

That was the pre-war Chesterton. He had a genius for the art of making a fact truly shattering. His great strength lay in his insane sanity, his bewildering clarity, his sparkling truisms, his original unoriginality. But all that verbal jugglery had its dangerous side. His nimble intellect eventually landed him into a sort of mental anarchy. From the moment that he discovered his amazing gift for playing with words and phrases, his descent from grace began. For a time he bore up manfully against the disease of logomania, but at length it got the better of him; and though he can still sometimes say the old things with a new brilliance, he has been

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verbally bed-ridden since the war began, and is now, to all intents and purposes, a permanent invalid.

He started life as a Liberal. Taking the side of the Boers in 1900, he defended the cause of the small nationalities with a courage and logic that never in those days deserted him. In fact he has always been logical—one might almost say illogically so. For when the question of small nationalities was again raised in 1914, he went stark, staring mad. He proved that it was possible to love the small nationalities so intensely that for their dear sakes he'd smash all the large nationalities. Europeans should swim in blood rather than that the hair of an Esquimau should be singed!

From 1914 till 1918 his mind was ravaged by logomania. It can be said with sober truth that his brain came out in spots. This was one of them: "A horror of war is the worst of the horrors of war." Even his most ardent disciples began to see through the seer. It was characteristic of him in those days that he was too arbitrary to agree to arbitration. Not being quite sure whether he was standing on his head or his heels, he naturally questioned the precise nature of everyone else's vertical position.

But we must remember the old Chesterton and forgive the later one for his sake. He was a great humorist and a great poet. Some of his verses will reverberate down the ages and not a few of his jests will be repeated when his period is forgotten. It may also be put to his credit that the topsy-turvy world pictured in his books was not one tenth so crazy as the real world in which he lived.

All the same it must now be obvious to anyone that Mr. Chesterton should have left biography severely alone. It is not the proper medium for a spinner of word-webs. True, he has said illuminating things in his biographies, but he could have said them to better advantage in his essays. And, in any case, the blight of the creed of a convert is now creeping over them. Take a recent instance of this.

In his biography of Stevenson he states, in effect, that if R. L. S. had sown his wild oats in a Catholic country instead of a Protestant one, his vices would not have been so vicious. Now that may or may not be true. I neither know nor care. What I do know is that it is not biography. What might have happened to someone if only something that did happen to him hadn't happened to him, and how he might

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have turned out if only circumstances had been different from what they were—such speculations are doubtless both profitable and absorbing, but they have nothing whatever to do with biography, which is a record of what *did* happen.

Stevenson, for better or worse, was the product of a Protestant country. The fact that, had he been a Parsee, he would not have been a Protestant, may be interesting, but it does not add to our knowledge of Stevenson. Indeed it subtracts from our knowledge, because it suggests that he might have been someone else.

Naturally we all know that Mr. Chesterton is trying to score a point for the faith he has espoused; and that fact alone makes us suspicious, causes a feeling of hostility between reader and writer, and creates a wretchedly wrong atmosphere for the study of biography, which can only be enjoyed when we have complete confidence in the fairness and open-mindedness of the biographer.

But if Mr. Chesterton has sinned against the searchlight of biography, what are we to say of Mr. Belloc? I think the latter must be awarded the prize for the standard work of Bad Biography in the Eng-

lish language. His "Cromwell" is a masterpiece of disingenuous innuendo. As he is reported to have said that he is more pleased with it than with any other of his writings, let us briefly survey the work, in order to find out, if possible, why he is so pleased. For the greater part of the following survey I am indebted to my friend, Hugh Kingsmill.

Somehow or otherhow Oliver Cromwell made his own age and posterity think of him as a big man. People either worshipped him or hated him. He was a god or a devil; but in either case he was big. Hatred, however, has gone out of fashion, and it would not have served Mr. Belloc's purpose of belittling Cromwell had he filled his sketch with noisy outcries against the Protector's monstrous perfidies and cruelties. Because, of course, Mr. Belloc was out to kill the notion that Oliver was big either as villain or as hero. He wished to do this because, as a Catholic, he loathed the man who never met Catholicism, either in arms or diplomacy, without defeating it. So the task he set himself was: how to dwarf Cromwell.

With this end in view, Mr. Belloc realized, perhaps for the first time in his life, the vital importance

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of being a Nonconformist. A Catholic turning away from Cromwell in disgust does not excite attention. A Nonconformist, compelled, after an anxious scrutiny of the facts, to abjure his hereditary worship of the Great Protector, sets people thinking.

Accordingly, Mr. Belloc, after we know not what private agonies of revulsion, announces himself at the close of his biographical study as one steeped in Nonconformist traditions. "My grandfather's family was in the very heart of English Nonconformity. . . . my mother was brought up by, and was devotedly attached to, Oliver's direct descendants. . . . I understand the hero-worship of Cromwell as well, I think, as any man. . . . I could wish to have settled my own judgment comfortably in that rut; but Truth is the greater friend."

Why Truth, in the matter of Cromwell, should have reserved her friendship for Mr. Belloc alone is not quite clear. It seems capricious of Truth to have allowed Milton, Mazarin, Voltaire, Carlyle, and the rest to mistake Cromwell for a great man; but so it was, and there is no more to be said about it.

What, then, is the truth about Cromwell as revealed to this distressed Nonconformist? In regard

to which of Cromwell's qualities will those who read this inspired communication of Mr. Belloc's find their previous notions most sharply corrected?

Apart from his genius as a cavalry leader and a remarkable endowment of low cunning, Cromwell was, we are told, "a very ordinary soul," who arrived at absolute power "by quickly succeeding accidents." His domestic policy consisted in summoning and dissolving parliaments. His foreign policy gives "a strong impression of futility . . . he fumbled about." Further, we are informed that he "played dirty tricks one after another upon his companions and his very dependents," he "loved money too much . . . was not above drinking his fill . . . was to be found sobbing openly and freely upon I know not how many occasions," that "his whole public life was a tissue of false declarations," that "he had a pleasure in cruelty," and that (a clever touch, this—it makes our hero-devil so ordinary and hum-drum) he was "a man of strict domestic life . . . chaste . . . excellent in his life as a husband and father." (Incidentally, his chastity and excellence as a husband have lately been questioned. Not that it matters much either way.)

How then, did this muddle-headed, weeping crook manage to arrive at supreme power and maintain himself there after he had arrived? Mr. Belloc's explanation is simple. He was frightened. He lived in a blue funk.

"He was," Mr. Belloc assures us, "immensely disturbed by every evidence, however slight, of opposition." Thus we find, on Mr. Belloc's authority, that all Cromwell's actions were directed throughout by a jealous care for the safety of his own person. Until the Great Rebellion he led "a sheltered life which he put to no peril." (With commendable shrewdness Mr. Belloc forgets to mention that Cromwell crossed to the continent with the object of fighting under Gustavus Adolphus.)

During the Great Rebellion he worked unceasingly to get Charles executed, as, in Mr. Belloc's opinion, the most obvious measure for ensuring his own safety should a loyalist reaction bring the younger Charles to the throne. Then the Irish alarmed him. He hurried over the sea and headed the storm of Drogheda. Later, the Scotch got on his nerves. He marched north and crushed them. And so on, until his exaggerated sense of self-preservation

had reduced him to being the most absolute ruler in Christendom.

Had he been of a less anxious temperament, had he fomented instead of discouraging the opposition of Charles I, of the Scots, the Irish, of Spain, and of his successive parliaments, he might have passed away peacefully on the block, instead of wretchedly perishing in bed in the throes of absolute power.

"He was nervous," Mr. Belloc sums up, "partly from strain, partly perhaps by temperament." Mr. Belloc leaves us wondering what would have happened to this planet if Cromwell's nerves had given out altogether.

Though Mr. Belloc may still be pleased with his work, I cannot help doubting whether it was worth the pains he has taken, and suffered, to establish his affiliation with Nonconformity.

Fortunately Mr. Belloc is not a bit like his biographies. These two incidents reveal him in a more attractive light.

A few summers ago there was a jolly crowd of cricketers in a Sussex village. Mr. Belloc had come down to watch the match, and afterwards we all

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adjourned to the house of a hospitable squire in the immediate vicinity of the village green.

As usual H. B. was the centre of all the chaff and chat that was going. His wit took wings and flew about in every direction to the delight and admiration of his listeners. Club-room yarns, tags of verse, banter and philosophy—all the ingredients that go to the preparation of a proper Bellocian *pot au feu*—were served up with the last ounce of spiciness his humor could give them.

While we were enjoying to the full this rich repast, a politician walked in. He had only recently been defeated as Liberal candidate for the local constituency, and he was bitter as only a defeated candidate can be bitter. He began speaking from the moment of his arrival, telling us of the trials and vicissitudes of a Liberal candidate's little hour, of the lies ("the criminal lies") which he exposes in vain, of the gross calumnies, the wicked misrepresentations, the villainous vilifications, the monstrous innuendos, the foul slanders, the perfidious libels, to which his honorable character and spotless soul are daily, nay hourly, subjected.

All this we heard, and more. Much more. We

listened patiently to a detailed recital of his career, from his first cradle to his last candidature, wherein he spoke of the disastrous chances and the insolent foe against which Truth and Humanity could not prevail. It was a painful story. We could scarcely speak after the first twenty minutes of its narration. We did try to speak *during* the first twenty minutes, but the ordered articulation and forensic tones of the defeated candidate overcame our modest efforts.

Mr. Belloc set us an admirable example by maintaining a motionless silence throughout. Of course we had not his advantages. The years he had spent in parliament stood him in good stead. He had schooled himself in the art of listening to an unlimited number of speeches for an unlimited number of hours; and the man who has safely survived a year of the House of Commons is beyond boredom.

Having concluded the history of his career, the defeated candidate paused for three seconds to fill his lungs. But a sudden epidemic of coughs and movements prevented him from propagating the necessary amount of pressure and he began again,

intending no doubt to pick up a reservoir of power by punctuation.

This time he treated us to a cataract of reminiscences touching the great political personages of the time. He quoted freely from confidential remarks made to him by Mr. Asquith, Mr. Lloyd George, Sir John Simon, and a host of others. He displayed a comprehensive knowledge of their habits, their domestic lives, their tastes, their pursuits, and their private opinions. He was even good enough to inform us that Mr. Lloyd George liked a cigar of a certain kind and sometimes refused cigars of other kinds, that Mr. Asquith frequently played bridge until two thirty in the morning, and that Sir John Simon was the greatest living exponent of the art of contriving and answering conundrums.

At last he reached a point in this exciting monologue when the introduction of Mrs. Asquith threatened to let loose another avalanche of anecdote and comment. It was a portentous moment. Once he was permitted a free run on that subject, there was no knowing what might have happened. Everyone seemed to scent the danger, and every-

one's eyes wandered to the clock on the mantelpiece, to the window, to our host, to Mr. Belloc.

As luck would have it, the mere mention of Margot Asquith and the unnumbered anecdotes her name foreshadowed brought on a crisis in the respiratory organs of the defeated candidate. He paused to attend to the reservoir. At the same moment Mr. Belloc looked up, and said in that quick, high voice of his:

"Have you ever heard the story of the lady and gentleman who were on their honeymoon?"

The defeated candidate stared at Mr. Belloc with his mouth open, the flood of his eloquence temporarily dammed.

"I beg your pardon?" he said—and the manner in which he said it suggested far more than the words.

Mr. Belloc repeated the question.

"No," said the defeated candidate, a sort of mental limpness beginning to creep over him.

"Oh!" said Mr. Belloc.

This did not advance matters, and the politician, now completely side-tracked, asked Mr. Belloc to

tell him the story of the lady and gentleman who were on their honeymoon.

"They cut it short," said Mr. Belloc, looking innocently at the ceiling.

This broke the spell; and, to everyone's relief, broke up the party also.

In Mr. Belloc's curiously contradictory nature—so broad in some respects, so narrow in others, so human and yet so cynical—there is a streak of whimsical wilfulness that alternately shocks and delights his companions. He has been known to horrify even a priest, and to charm even a prig. The Catholic may love him for protesting against the Protestant, and the Protestant may adore him for being catholic at the expense of Catholicism. But neither can ever feel quite comfortable when he is about, because his ironic shafts usually pierce a dozen targets.

A lighter aspect of his whimsicality was revealed on one occasion to the clerk of a railway booking-office. Mr. Belloc was crossing to France that day and found himself at Victoria, his arms full of books, deep in thought. While the queue of pas-

sengers increased behind him, he laid bare the secret of his anxious meditations to the aforesaid clerk.

"I am in a great difficulty," said he, "but I think, with your kind assistance, it may be overcome. The position, briefly, is this: I am a widower, with a son at Oxford, and two daughters living at home."

Here a voice in the queue interjected "I say!" But Mr. Belloc was not to be deterred.

"I belong to two clubs," he proceeded, "but the expenses incurred at one of them are inconsiderable. Thus, for present purposes, it may be said, with a reasonable approximation to the truth, that I belong to one club."

"Do you want a ticket?" prosaically demanded the booking-office clerk.

"I am coming to that," replied Mr. Belloc. "I will not trouble you with details of my household expenditure, nor is it necessary that I should supply you with such items as the cost of my own clothing, the scholastic requirements of my children, and so forth."

"'Urry up, there!" came threateningly from the rear of the rapidly growing file of ticket-purchasers.

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"One moment, *please*," said Mr. Belloc tartly over his shoulder.

He then summarized the situation as it affected the clerk:

"Roughly speaking, my income is two thousand pounds a year. It varies, of course, from year to year; but one may base one's calculations, for all practical purposes, on that figure. Doubtless it would fluctuate, with a serious downward tendency, if at any moment, through death or other causes, my regular output ceased. I beg you to bear that carefully in mind. Your final decision must be largely guided by it. To continue: my expenses, which I need not recapitulate, including the rent and upkeep of my house, average out at something between fifteen and eighteen hundred pounds a year."

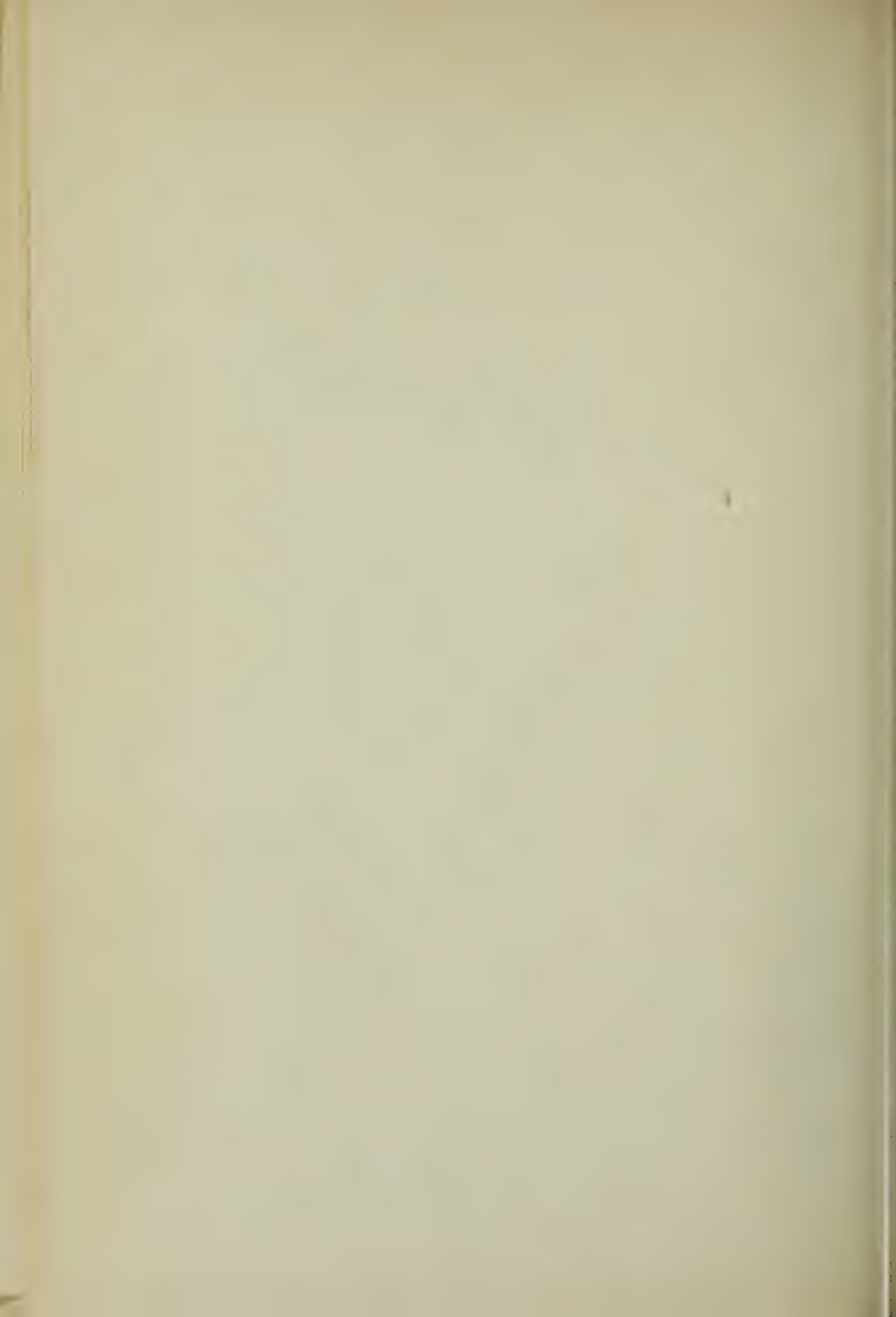
"What the bl——" began an absurdly impatient gentleman who had actually left his place in the queue for the purpose of discovering the precise reason for the delay.

But before he had got far enough to shock any ladies who may have been present, Mr. Belloc turned to him, gracefully presented him with a text-book

on Trigonometry, and addressed himself once more to the obliging clerk:

"I am on my way to Paris," he concluded, "and the question that is troubling me is this: am I, under the circumstances, morally justified in taking a first-class ticket?"

But Mr. Belloc was the victim of quite a different mood when he solemnly sat down and penned his portrait of a "Safety-first" Cromwell.



CHAPTER VII

Imagination in Biography



DUMAS once said that historical novels were more interesting than history, and more accurate. This suggests that if historians drew on their imaginations a little more than they do, their work would be more truthful than it is.

There is a lot to be said for such a view. We all instinctively question the truth of facts; we all instinctively accept the truth behind legends. Take a case from the Bible. When we read there that Jesus Christ fed five thousand people with five loaves and a few small fishes, we do not take the number given at its face value; we simply believe that Jesus Christ made a small amount of food go a very long way among a large number of people.

Take a modern instance. During the war we were all quite willing to believe that the Austrian army was having a thin time of it; but when Mr. Belloc produced statistics proving what a thin time it was really having, we instantly became sceptical.

It is the spirit of a story that we accept, seldom its letter. Facts, we feel, are nearly always wrong;

they miss so much. Also they are unimportant except as mere signposts.

Look at the matter from another angle. A fact by itself is quite useless. When we read that Shakespeare left his wife his second-best bed, we realize at once that the fact of his bequest tells us nothing. What we want to know is whether the second-best bed was the one he and his wife slept in, because if it wasn't the legacy was almost an insult.

Now it is the duty of the historian or the biographer to get at the essential truth that underlies the bare record of facts. That is why the historian and the biographer must be an artist. And it is because he is so seldom an artist that histories and biographies are usually valueless and unreadable. We turn with relief to the romancists, who at least manage to endow an epoch with color and an individual with life.

But the day of the academic historian and biographer is over. We insist nowadays on having our "lives" served up to us imaginatively, in palatable form. We are no longer content with the dry record of facts. We want the truth that is only too often

concealed by facts. Or, at any rate, one convincing aspect of the truth, since the whole truth, as I have already explained, is out of the question.

This raises the query: to what extent should a writer of biography use his imagination in the delineation of character and the editing of facts? Is he justified in inventing anecdotes to reveal his subject or in altering occurrences to heighten his effects? We must remember that biography, if it is to develop as an art, must be as free of mere photography as painting is.

The best example I know of unimaginative biography is Lockhart's "Life of Sir Walter Scott." It has serious limitations—one of which is its length—but it is on the whole a most satisfying piece of biographical photography. It gives the exterior of Scott, in a dozen different positions, admirably; and I doubt if that kind of thing could ever be done better. But that kind of thing is now out of date. We are no longer satisfied with photography in biographical work. We want the biographer to be as free, as individual, as creative as the painter. We want him to show us more than the clothes and body of a man. And so we mustn't mind if he puts

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in a light here and a shade there out of his own head, because it is only by the exercise of his imagination that he can give life to his subject.

The extent of imaginative work permissible in biography can never be determined. The artist will in the end be judged by the convincing and satisfying quality of his work. Inductive biography is still, comparatively, in its infancy. It has great possibilities, and it is bound to be greatly abused.

The modern method of discovering the personality of a man by a close study of his works is dangerous, because a great writer is able by sheer intuition to express emotions he has never actually experienced. When Shelley said, "I am the nerve o'er which do creep the else unfelt oppressions of mankind," he did not mean that he had personally experienced oppression. Experience of a generic nature may be necessary to the poet who wishes to express passion, but not of a specific character.

What is difficult and dangerous when one is dealing with a great man is, however, relatively simple when one's subject is an ordinary person whose appeal is to ordinary folk very much like himself. A great man requires someone on his own level to

write his biography; which explains why the biographies of great men are so unsatisfactory. Practically all the best biographies are of second-rate people.

Thus the inductive method might be fatal in a biography of Disraeli, but it would answer perfectly in a biography of Mr. Lloyd George. It has been fatal again and again in the case of Shakespeare, but one could use it with safety in the case of Sir James Barrie. Let us try the inductive method on the last-named.

With all the caninness of an unemotional Scot, Sir James Barrie at an early age spotted the chinks in the Sassenach's armor, and promptly brought every lethal weapon in his mental muniment to bear upon those chinks. The Englishman loved to wallow in cottage-sentiment. Was not his favorite song "Home Sweet Home"? Did he not adore "The Old Folks at Home"? Didn't every true Englishman's heart go out to the innocent laughter and prattle of children? Of course it did. So every Englishman's heart must be ravished with regrets, torn with memories, and soothed with the song of youth.

Then there was another thing. It had not escaped

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his notice that, next to a tear, the true Sassenach loved a smile—sunshine and rain together, so to speak. While the eye was dripping, the mouth must be twitching. Not a wry smile. Oh, dear, no! It had to be a happy, cheerful smile, a smile that would more than console for the sorrow—a *brave* smile. The tear behind the smile, or the smile behind the tear: it didn't matter which, so long as each had a turn. Technically speaking, it would doubtless be as well to work on the deeper emotion first, and then, when the handkerchiefs were busy, to introduce an innocuously incongruous element that would send a ripple of mirth over the already snivelling house. That was the unfailing recipe: snivel and ripple, ripple and snivel.

Old folks' memories, children's artless prattle, happy homes, sad lovers, comic turns—he must introduce all those, and ring the changes at decent intervals. Thus it came about that an eminent authority on literature was able to declare, with a full sense of its epoch-making significance, that Sir James Barrie had never penned a word that could by any stretch of modesty bring a blush to the face of a girl.

Incidentally, it was of the utmost importance to mention now and again such noble qualities as courage, perseverance, fortitude under misfortune, a stoical acceptance of failure, a philosophical endurance of success. It would be easy for him to do this because, like all timid men, he adored the manly virtues. But the great thing was to touch, and sometimes even to twang, the heart-strings. The result, as sure as fate, would be the stretching, and sometimes even the bursting, of the purse-strings.

So he settled down to the invigorating and wholly praiseworthy pursuit of catering for the dramatic palate of the Sassenachs. The Sassenachs were delighted and asked for more. He gave them more. He went on giving them more. They gorged themselves upon his viands, but they could not have enough. For twenty-five years the dramatic menu was crammed with Barrie sweetmeats. And the curious thing was that the chef himself began to develop a keen taste for his own delicacies.

At first he had prepared his dishes according to certain definite cookery rules. He had carefully compiled a standard Barrie-Beeton for his guidance. But as his culinary skill grew, his personality underwent

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a gradual transformation. He commenced to "live" his own creations, to identify himself with his own dishes. He even disclosed such alarming symptoms of disintegration as an Old Folks complex, a Child complex, a Home complex, and a Courage complex.

By degrees he had made a new world for himself. The sentiment that he had once so successfully exploited now held him in its grip; he had become a creature of his own creation. He struggled against his fate for a while, but at last he succumbed; and in "Mary Rose" he was even weak enough to give the game away. Sometimes, like his heroine, he can come back to real life for a brief space of time, but he is always at the beck and call of the "voices."

So much for Sir James Barrie. What I have said may or may not be strictly true, but I am positive it is broadly and fundamentally true.

Now try that sort of thing with Shakespeare or Cervantes or Swift or Shaw, and you'll get about as near the truth as Mr. Wyndham Lewis, whose mental myopia is so complete that he actually mentions Sonnet 20 as a proof that Shakespeare was homosexually inclined, whereas the one thing it

must prove, if it proves anything at all, is that he wasn't.

The imaginative and inductive method, then, has its limitations. But the imagination of the biographer can be used in other ways than revealing an author by the aid of his works, or a statesman by the aid of his public utterances. It can be used, and has been used far more often than most people think, by tampering with facts for the purposes of art and by strengthening the point of an anecdote in order to make it reveal the subject more completely or in a more characteristic attitude.

Compare a story or parable of Christ's in St. Matthew with the same story or parable in St. Luke and you will instantly see what I mean. In modern biography we have the example of Mr. Strachey, whose sketch of Florence Nightingale has been heightened by a pure invention, or adjustment of the facts, in the last scene.

But even the most slavish stickler for biographical exactitude cannot escape the inventiveness of life. In telling the story of an actual occurrence, everybody with an ounce of imagination wilfully exaggerates the facts for the purpose, usually, of enter-

taining the listeners. Subconsciously, however, another purpose is at work—that of making the story more characteristic of the person it is about. Thus the story gains in strength or point as it goes from mouth to mouth, and by this common process of editing it reaches a significance it never had when first told. At length the artist comes along, uses the story as an anecdote straight from life, and it is quoted authoritatively by generations of biographers.

There are innumerable examples of this. I will take one.

The impression left upon her contemporaries by Emily Brontë was that of a masculine woman, possessed of immense will-power. Someone—it doesn't matter who—had heard the story that her brother, Branwell, had fought against death with all his strength and had actually died in a perpendicular posture. But that did not seem at all characteristic of a drunkard, who should by rights have died in the horizontal position so beloved of inebriates. It did, however, seem characteristic of Emily, whose violence and independence of spirit would naturally have opposed the idea of extinction and forced from

her just such a final gesture of rebellion. The story seemed right and fitting in her case, and the necessary transference took place.

Actually, it appears, she climbed down and was willing in her last moments to see a doctor. But the Branwell story stuck to her for at least two generations, and it is doubtful whether it will ever be assigned to the proper quarter in the popular imagination.

And so we find that when a thing goes into literature, it becomes true. The word is made flesh.

It mustn't therefore be supposed that anecdotes should be invented indiscriminately or that the imagination should be allowed to run free of all restraint. After all, the biographer is painting a portrait from life and he must give a convincing representation of character. It is only where he can definitely improve on fact that he should be given a free rein; though it is hardly necessary to add that by the mere process of selection, arrangement and presentation, he is constantly improving on fact. It can be left to the biographer's own judgment as to how far he should go. If he is a good biographer, an artist possessed of sound judgment and literary tact,

he can be safely trusted not to abuse his freedom. If he is a bad biographer, his work will die, so it doesn't much matter whether he abuses it or not.

I have already remarked in a previous chapter that the future belongs to biography. All our best writers will gravitate towards it, because they will find it the best medium for that indirect criticism of life which, I think, will be the fashion of the future. The novel, the drama, the essay, the poem, have had their turn. They have been exploited by our leading writers as media for their direct criticism of life. But dogmatic criticism is out of date. We are not so positive as our predecessors. We have no panaceas for imperfection. And so we shall find in biography our natural manner of expression. By hints, by glimpses, by implication, we shall re-write history and reveal the thousand aspects of a Truth we can but dimly apprehend. . . .

I have spoken so much about invented anecdote that I had better perhaps give an instance of what I mean.

As everyone knows by this time, the late Sir Herbert Tree was a farceur; he was never happy except when indulging his favorite pastime of leg-

pulling. It would be the duty of his biographer to give several typical examples of his habits in this respect. Let us suppose that the biographer had read or heard of the following three stories:

(1) One day Tree drifted into the post office that used to be opposite the stage door of His Majesty's Theatre. For a while he stood looking at the girl behind the counter in his usual semi-somnambulist fashion. After enduring his gaze for half a minute, she asked what he wanted.

"What have you got?" murmured Tree.

"Stamps, postal orders, money orders, telegram forms, and Bank of England notes," she replied.

"Show me some stamps," said Tree.

The girl humored him and brought out a large sheet of stamps, which she unfolded and held before his face. Tree narrowed his eyes, laid his head on one side, and scrutinized the sheet with the utmost care and deliberation. Then, placing his finger exactly in the center of the sheet, he whispered:

"I'll take that one, please."

(2) During a rehearsal of "Macbeth" a very self-important female bustled up to him on the stage. Tree was apparently thoroughly bored by her at-

tentions, and had, on some previous occasion, made the excuse of illness in order to avoid her. This time she had probably been told a lie when she called, but hearing from another source that Tree was rehearsing, she fought her way through to him.

He was overheard to say "Oh, my God!" under his breath when he caught sight of her, but that was all he had time for. She opened fire at once:

"Dear Sir Herbert, I was *so* sorry to hear of your illness. I *do* hope you are better now. But *please* tell me what was the matter with you. It sounded *such* a funny name."

This, of course, had reference to some purely imaginary ailment which Tree had invented on the spur of the moment.

"Do you seriously mean to tell me that you have never heard of phlectomosis?" asked Tree gravely.

"Indeed I do!" rejoined the lady; "I'm afraid I'm very ignorant. But it sounds *too* dreadful for words. *Do* tell me what it is."

Tree went up to the lady and imparted the information in a sort of stage-whisper:

"I shouldn't like it to get about; but phlecto-

mosis, from which I regret to say I am still suffering, is a rush of sense to the head."

Having said which, and with a very polite "Good-afternoon," he left her wondering.

(3) Tree often lunched at the Carlton, and would usually take a friend with him. One day he went there with Comyns Carr, whom he always called "Joe."

"Say what you want, Joe, and don't worry me—I must think," he said, as they took their seats at the table.

Joe said what he wanted while his friend mused. Then the waiter turned his attention to Tree, who, after looking hard at the menu for several seconds, said:

"I will have the tongues of fourteen nightingales and a curried cuckoo, please."

The waiter smiled and apologized for his inability to obtain these delicacies. Tree insisted, and at last the headwaiter appeared on the scene. The order was repeated, but even the headwaiter had to admit the curious limitations of the hotel's gastronomic arrangements.

Tree refused to leave it at that; indeed he showed

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considerable annoyance, and demanded to see the manager of the hotel. After some little delay the manager came.

"I am very sorry, Sir Herbert, if we cannot get what you want," he began in a very flustered manner, "but if you will be so good as to let me know your requirements, I will see that everything possible is done for your future satisfaction."

"That's very kind of you indeed," answered Tree, beaming upon him, "but all that I want at the moment is a grilled bloater."

There was a dead silence. Tree smiled winningly at the manager, who retired nonplussed. Comyns Carr was rather put out, and said so. Tree dismissed his remarks with a wave of the hand.

"As a matter of fact, Herbert, I didn't think it a bit funny," pursued Carr.

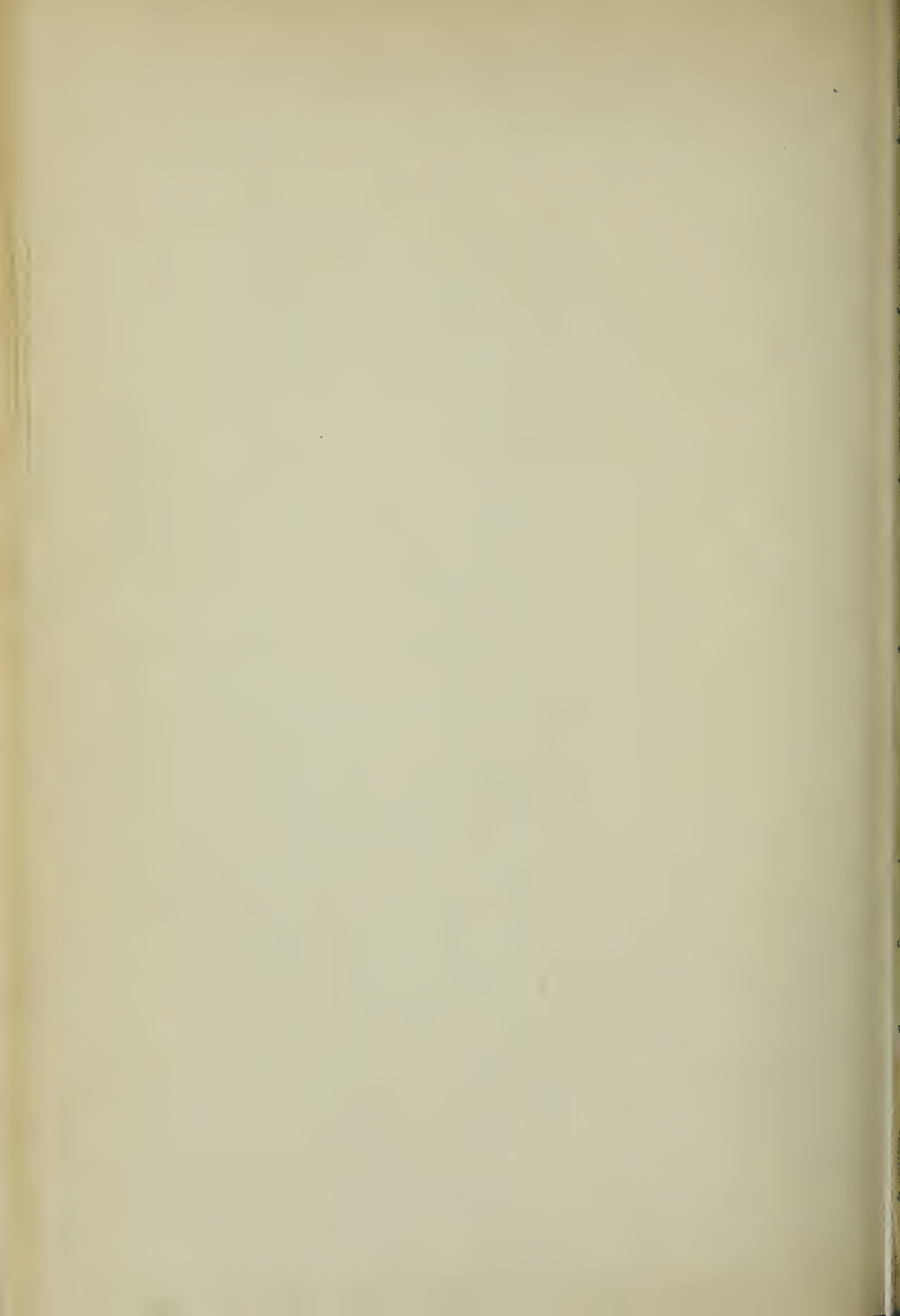
"I know, Joe, I know," said Tree; "I felt sure I could trust you not to split."

This was too much for Carr, who split in one sense there and then, and in another sense later on.

Now I fancy my readers will agree with me that, as an example of leg-pulling, our biographer would

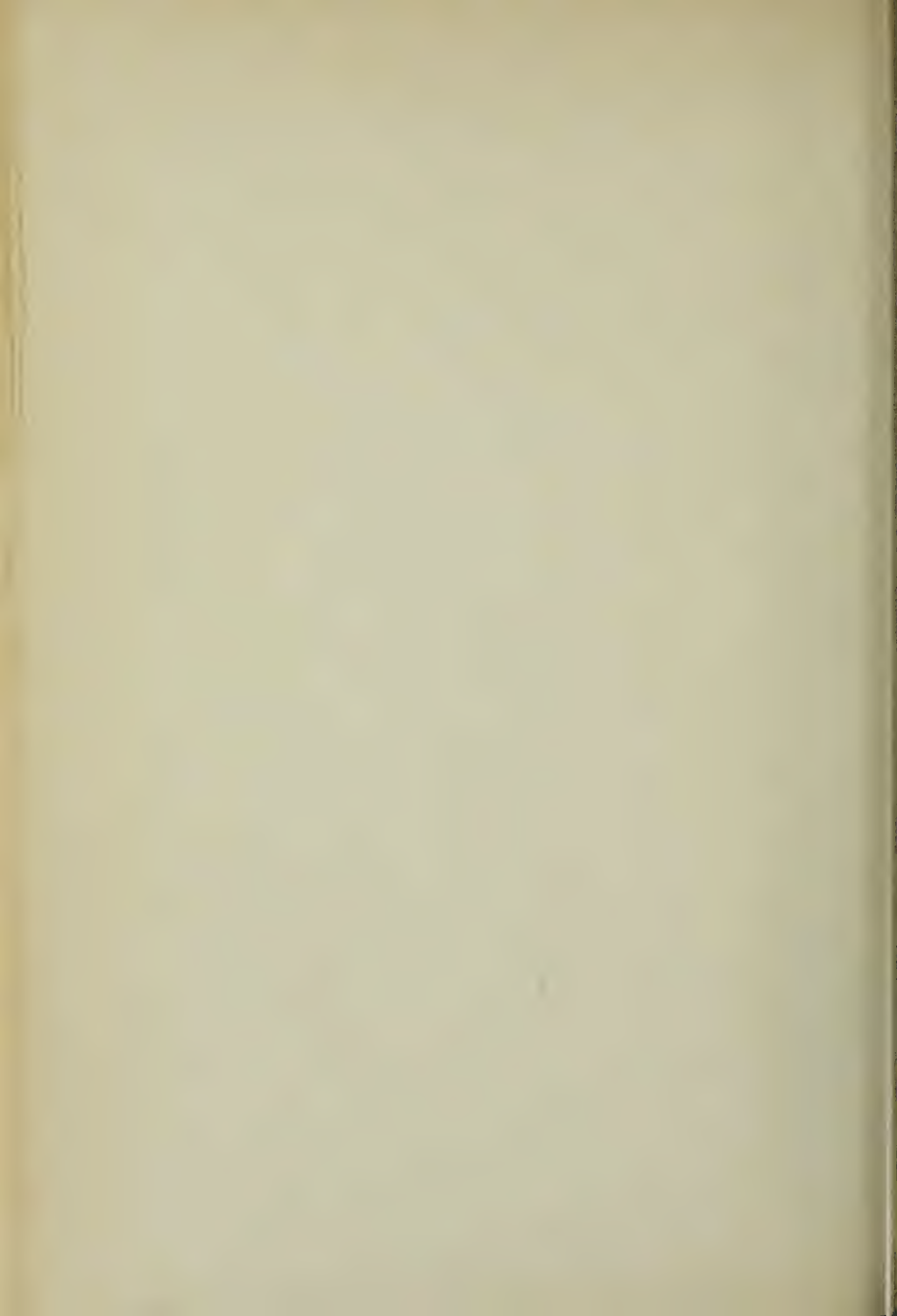
have to choose the last story, assuming he hadn't room for all three.

It is certainly the one that I have told most frequently, partly because it is the most characteristic of the man, partly because it gets a heartier laugh than the others, and partly because I invented it myself.



CHAPTER VIII

Panoramic Biography



AN ALTERNATIVE heading to this chapter could be "Cinembiography." The post-war period has seen the development of one method of biography which I cannot help thinking is highly detrimental to the art. It is due no doubt to the unbounded popularity of the cinema. Its practitioners have brought the craft of Hollywood to the art of History and called the result Biography. Two names stand out above the crowd of cinembiographers, both for the enormity of their achievement and the praise that has been lavished upon it. They are: Philip Guedalla and Emil Ludwig.

The last has certainly not produced least, so we will take him first and treat him, as he has never treated us, with merciful brevity.

The chief thing to note is that he writes biography with a moral object in view, though one may hazard the conjecture that the monumental nature of his undertakings is not wholly uninfluenced by monetary considerations. Listen to this from his Foreword to "Bismarck":

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"We think it proper in our day to make public characters plastic, as an example and a warning to everyone."

And this from his "Napoleon":

"The ardent youth of Europe can find as an example and a warning no greater man than the one who . . . made and suffered the most violent commotions."

And this from his "Genius and Character":

"Why write of characters at all unless an example, or perhaps even a warning, may result from the process?"

The spectacle of Herr Ludwig searching history for examples and warnings is an inspiring one, and will, I hope, lighten a page or two of his own life-story whenever someone feels equal to the task of writing it; but it would be a bad day for biography if his conception of its function ever became universal.

Towards the end of his "Napoleon" we are told that there is "no place in my record for portraits of the generals. Nothing could be admitted to this one volume which did not throw light upon the history of the one interior."

We pause to take breath. The "one volume" is so long that we wonder how on earth he could have overlooked anything, and so large that our arms are aching with the fatigue of keeping it within a reasonable distance of our eyes.

Naturally we are grateful to him for giving the generals the go-by; but we cannot help thinking that, since Napoleon was a general himself, a slight knowledge of his professional comrades and right-hand men might throw a little light on the character of their leader. Herr Ludwig has overlooked, not only the generals, but the elementary fact that a character reveals itself in its relation to other characters, that in fact a character can only be distinguished *as* a character when placed in contrast with other characters, and that in order to know a man we must know something about his intimate associates.

His neglect of Napoleon's generals is due to that disastrous initial mistake of his. Napoleon is not interesting to him as a character, but as an example and a warning. With the eye of a born scenario-writer, he sees the Emperor as a colossus entirely surrounded by pigmies. His book is a drama, con-

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sisting of one "star" part and a milky-way of "supers." Its popularity in this country is doubtless due to the fact that Josephine is given a fair amount of prominence. British biographies have either ignored Josephine entirely or treated her as a much-wronged, tear-eyed Ophelia. Ludwig works up the heart-interest admirably, and the result is a pleasing picture for biographical film fans.

The drawback to the cinema method is that the biographer is so determined to be picturesque that he has no time to be anything else. Examples of Ludwig's superficial psychology abound. Here is one.

He gives as an instance of Bismarck's hatred being stronger than his love the story of a duel in which Bismarck fails to drop his antagonist and wonders for what purpose God could have spared the useless fellow. Ludwig says: "In this case, as in so many others, it is plain that his hatred for his opponent is stronger than his love for himself"—because, if you please, Bismarck does not trouble to ask why God spared *him*!

Nothing could be further from the truth. It is a superb example of Bismarck's egotism. Naturally

God spares him; that goes without saying; he is Bismarck! As for his opponent, it is a matter of complete indifference to Bismarck whether he is alive or dead, though in passing it is perhaps permissible to wonder why the Almighty had the bad taste to deflect the course of a Bismarck bullet.

The book entitled "The Son of Man" has all the virtues of a highly successful religious "movie." I have been unable to discover any other virtues in it. But that may be because I prefer the simple narrative style of St. Luke to the pseudo-psychological sprawl of Herr Ludwig.

The healthiest sign of the present age is its keen interest in biography. It shows that we take more interest in this world than the next. On the other hand, there is a strange lack of discrimination in our praise of the biographers. Take the case of Philip Guedalla. His works receive the unstinted applause of the critics and find their way through several editions. Let us consider his principal contribution to the art of biography.

He, too, has mastered the cinematographic method, but with a difference. The panorama of life which he unfolds under the title of "Palmer-

ston" is curiously lifeless. His is the mosaic method; but unfortunately the bits and pieces when flung together—he never troubles to fit them—fail to make a recognizable picture; indeed they are scattered about in such confusion that they fail to make anything except a book of four hundred and fifty odd pages.

There is a passage in Mr. Strachey's "Queen Victoria" which runs as follows:

"They visited Louis Philippe at the Château d'Eu; they visited King Leopold in Brussels. It happened that a still more remarkable Englishwoman was in the Belgian capital, but she was not remarked; and Queen Victoria passed unknowing before the steady gaze of one of the mistresses in M. Héger's *pensionnat*. 'A little, stout, vivacious lady, very plainly dressed—not much dignity or pretension about her,' was Charlotte Brontë's comment as the royal carriage and six flashed by her, making her wait on the pavement for a moment, and interrupting the train of her reflections. Victoria was in high spirits, and even succeeded in instilling a little cheerfulness into her uncle's sombre Court."

A perfect specimen of panoramic biography. And

note, please, that Miss Brontë is only introduced in direct relation to Queen Victoria. Yet it was a fatal slip on the part of Mr. Strachey. It struck Mr. Guedalla all of a heap. It opened up before him wider and ever wider vistas. Sixty solid pages of "Palmerston" are devoted to the strumming of this one note. If you don't believe me—and I admit it requires great faith to accept the word of one man on such a matter—look it up and see for yourself. Throughout sixty incredible pages Palmerston sits in the War Office while the world wags outside. Mr. Guedalla makes the world wag by introducing scores of utterly irrelevant incidents, most of which require an expert's knowledge of the period before they can be appreciated. This is realized by Mr. Guedalla himself, who thoughtfully provides us with pages and pages of "Authorities," though he carelessly forgets to mention that nearly all of them ought to be read before we can understand what he is talking about.

Here is an example of the panoramic method at its worst:

"He (Palmerston) asserted sturdily that 'it was his distinct and deliberate opinion that it was the

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right of the state to deal with the trust of the property of the Church.' That month a loaded cab rolled under a 'damp-clouded kind of sky' across Belgrave Square, plunged into Chelsea, and set down a wide-eyed couple (with a canary and a multitude of baggage) before a newly painted door in Cheyne Row. Lord Grey, a trifle weary, repaired the gaps in his cabinet. . . ."

And so on, as I have already said, for sixty pages.

The little incident I have quoted only requires a knowledge of Froude's "Carlyle" (10 volumes) and Jane Carlyle's "Letters" (5 volumes). Several other incidents within those sixty pages require a knowledge of all the diaries, memoirs, and letters of the period.

The whole book must be read from cover to cover to be believed. I beg you not to take me on trust. Get it, read it, and remain for ever lost in wonder at the critics who hailed it as a masterpiece of biography. I can only promise that you will extract one piece of comfort from it: your own task in reading it will be as nothing compared with the gigantic task Mr. Guedalla undertook in reading up the matter necessary for its compilation.

Mr. Strachey, I hope, is already regretting that happy though unfortunate reference to Charlotte Brontë in "Queen Victoria."

In addition to a panorama of life so extended that it goes far beyond the horizon of the average reader, Mr. Guedalla also treats us to a number of literary mannerisms which would get any schoolboy into serious difficulties with his form-master. These, like the panoramic incidents, run like a refrain throughout his work. Armies are made to "feel" their way or to "fumble" or to "stumble." Scores of people are described as doing things "without enthusiasm." Bayonets nearly always "gleam." Guns invariably "thud." And an astonishing series of incidents occur "in the failing light" of an October, November, or December evening, or under the spring, summer, or autumn sunshine. Inanimate objects "stare" at the comings and goings of animate objects, and nearly all the leading characters, at one time or another, make striking public "gestures."

He has a Boy Scout's love of military movement and describes it in glowing passages. That kind of thing, though overdone, was all right in a book on Napoleon III, because the glitter of military pag-

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eantry fits the period. But when one finds it repeated *ad nauseam* in a book on a civilian, one cannot help wondering whether absence of mind is, after all, the best qualification for the writing of biography.

Mr. Guedalla's epigrams, which are lavishly strewn about his pages, are sometimes illuminating and frequently amusing, but they do not atone for the flatness of his characterization. Also they give one the impression of careful preparation, which rather destroys their effect. In this connection I remember a story which possibly illustrates his method.

When he was President of the Oxford Union, he once begged Mr. Arnold Lunn to ask him two special questions—there are always questions before the debate starts—the answers to which he had carefully prepared. Mr. Lunn agreed, and in due course put the first question. Mr. Guedalla's witty reply sent a ripple of laughter through the assembly. Mr. Lunn rose again and put the second question. The President brought off a brilliant retort, which brought down the house. But Mr. Lunn now felt it was his turn. Rising gravely from his seat once more, he gently inquired:

"What was the third question you wished me to ask you?"

In spite of the fact that Mr. Guedalla had no answer, the house rocked a third time.

To return to panoramics, if I may coin a word to define the entirely new science of biography under discussion. I have recently heard that Mr. Guedalla is writing a "Life of Wellington." This opens up boundless possibilities, of which I sincerely hope he will not avail himself. But in the meantime I will give him an idea of what to avoid.

I am (let us say) writing a biography of Mr. Baldwin in 1960. I have just reached a momentous year, 1928, in which the great Church of England crisis is being faced by his government. This is how it should *not* be dealt with:

"In the July sunshine the aged Archbishop drove to Buckingham Palace and stayed an hour with the King. The air was laden with rumors of his resignation, and as his car swung through the gates of the Palace a passer-by named Arnold Bennett noted an expression of relief upon his face which did not belie them. That month the guns spoke round the walls of Pekin and the capital was occupied by the

forces of Marshal Feng. Mr. Lytton Strachey was putting the finishing touches to his book on Queen Elizabeth, and a restless world had just been reassured by Mr. Bernard Shaw's appeal to the Intelligent Woman. Mr. Baldwin spent a week-end with Sir William Joynson-Hicks, and while they drifted from the subject of the New Prayer Book to the more attractive topic of Hyde Park morality, Mr. Julian Huxley, with a weary gesture, was trying to explain to Mr. Robert Blatchford why he was unable to accept the Bible as evidence for the resurrection of the body.

"The world went on, and under darkening skies Mr. Baldwin drove down to Winchester to receive the Freedom of the City. A little crowd stared at the furniture vans that were impeding the traffic in the Adelphi, and a faint cheer came through the gathering gloom as an old man stepped briskly into his new quarters at Whitehall Court. Signor Mussolini was fumbling with the question of Communistic agitation, and, in Berlin, Herr Ludwig was receiving world-wide congratulations on his daring psycho-analysis of the Son of Man.

"Accompanied by six reigning Princes of India,

the Ambassadors of eight nations, the ministers of twenty more, and his own family, King George drove through cheering multitudes to the great Air Armada at Hendon; and as he took the salute, Mr. J. R. Clynes was informing a meeting of his followers at Blisworth that Labor was still united. Far off, in the blue haze of a tropical sun, the troops wheeled and swung through the main street of Mexico City, and while a population of bandits elected their new President to the sound of sabres, a fashionable historian of the day was busily perfecting the style in which the present work is written.

"Mr. Baldwin, without enthusiasm, carried his theological troubles to Chequers, and as he discussed the crops with the local farmers, a young man, who went by the curious name of Coward, was completing his latest batch of topical songs in the lengthening shadows of the Balearics. . . ."

I should love to go on like that indefinitely, as there is a real fascination (for the writer) in this kind of jigsaw literature, but my readers have probably had enough. In justice to Mr. Guedalla, I ought to add that his book, "The Second Empire," is in-

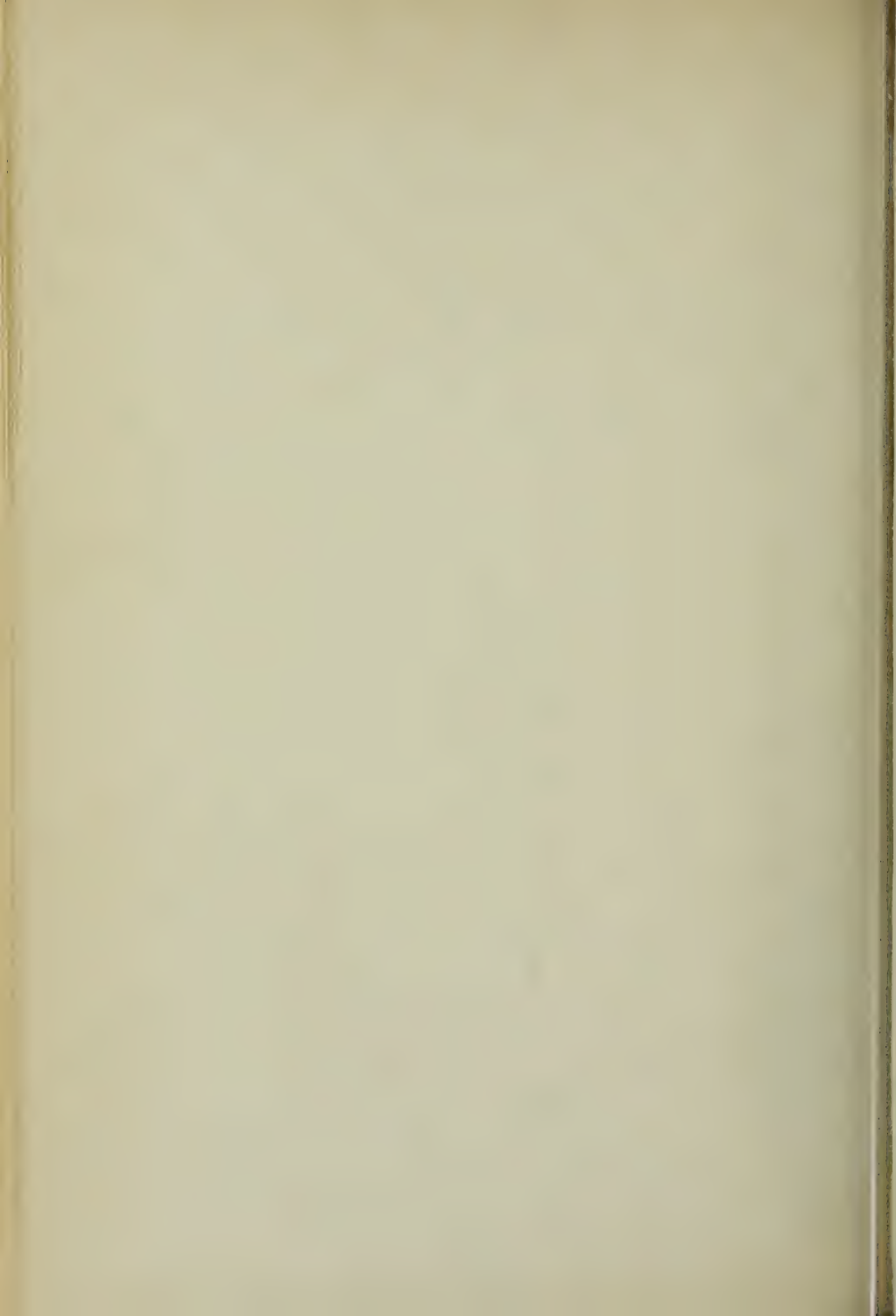
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finitely better than his "Palmerston." I have read it twice already and hope to read it again. He had not completely succumbed to his mannerisms when he wrote it.

But in every respect the panoramic method is hopelessly wrong in biography. No character can survive it, and characterization is the salt of biography. Also it proves conclusively that what is commonly known as a bird's eye view is in reality a blurred eye's view.

CHAPTER IX

Ideal Biography



WE HAVE NOW discussed the more important questions raised by the art of biography. We have seen the sort of temperament required, and the sort of temperament that is quite definitely unsuitable, for its right treatment. We have seen that absolute truth is an impossible ideal, that "pure" biography can never be written by mortal man, that one aspect of essential truth (which is the most we can ever hope for) is frequently at variance with mere facts, and that in any case truth can only be a point of view. We have noted the dismal effects of moral earnestness, high ideals, religion, didacticism and partisanship on biography. We have, I hope, agreed that "personal" biography can only be used as a stepping-stone to the production of the perfect work of biographical art. We have viewed the dangers of the panoramic and cinematographic methods. We have come to the conclusion that the imagination must play a large part in any first-rate biography, and that even an unimaginative biographer is bound by the fallibility and partiality of human evidence to

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produce a portrait that is, in many respects, fanciful. For no one can dispute that two reliable witnesses of the same scene will often report it differently and give a contradictory impression of its actors.

The reader may object to my coupling him with myself in the number of things we have "seen" together. If so, I can only say that I have done everything in my power to make him see what is perfectly plain to me.

Where we will, I am sure, unreservedly agree is over Mr. Lytton Strachey, who, temperamentally and imaginatively, approximates more closely to the ideal biographer than anyone we have ever produced or are ever likely to produce. He has founded a school of biography as surely as Shakespeare founded a school of drama, and his followers are no nearer to him than Shakespeare's were to him.

I call Mr. Strachey the ideal biographer because he has mastered the most difficult part of the biographer's art: fusion. He has unified a hundred and more (sometimes conflicting) glimpses of character supplied by others, and there emerge from his pages those rounded, coherent, convincing portraits we

already know so well—portraits as vivid, as alive, as any creations in romantic literature.

He has been accused of having a point of view, which is just as pointless as accusing him of being human. This, at least, is indisputable: he has got closer to the ideal of absolute detachment and impartiality—closer, that is, to a superhuman attitude—than anyone else who has written biography. He stands head and shoulders above all his British competitors in that art, and as a literary and creative artist he must be ranked as a genius of the first order.

There is only one British biographer whose method and mastery can stand comparison with Mr. Strachey's for an instant, and that is Dr. Johnson. But then Dr. Johnson never set himself such a task as Mr. Strachey did in "Queen Victoria," and not one of his individual works can be mentioned in the same breath with any one of Mr. Strachey's.

Yet the Doctor was a wonderful fellow. Considering the old man's prejudices—and one is liable to forget that he wrote his "Lives of the Poets" when he was round about seventy—his detachment is remarkable and his vitality and skill nothing short of

miraculous. There are isolated passages in his work that have never been approached by anyone else. Even Mr. Strachey would have to salute him as "Master" after reading such a passage as that recording the death of Smith:

"Having formed his plan," (of composing a drama on Lady Jane Grey) "and collected materials, he declared that a few months would complete his design; and, that he might pursue his work with less frequent avocations, he was, in June 1710, invited by Mr. George Duckett to his house at Gatham in Wiltshire. Here he found such opportunities of indulgence as did not much forward his studies, and particularly some strong ale, too delicious to be resisted. He ate and drank till he found himself plethorick: and then, resolving to ease himself by evacuation, he wrote to an apothecary in the neighbourhood a prescription of a purge so forcible, that the apothecary thought it his duty to delay it till he had given notice of its danger. Smith, not pleased with the contradiction of a shopman, and boastful of his own knowledge, treated the notice with rude contempt, and swallowed his own

medicine, which, in July 1710, brought him to the grave. He was buried at Gartham."

If that isn't the ultimate perfection of biographical writing, there is no art in literature. Mr. Strachey has clearly learnt his trade at Dr. Johnson's school. But was there ever such a wonderful pupil?

It was a memorable day for many of us when this new planet-portent swam into our ken. It seemed as if some wonderful new literary realm had been simultaneously discovered and subdued. We had the same sort of sensation that must have caused the Elizabethans to go wild with joy when "Henry IV" was first produced. It was the kind of thing that can only happen once in a century, if as often. It was a fresh and wholly unexpected experience, a new chapter in the life of man, a revelation, the sunrise of a literary epoch.

Unhappily, it would almost appear to have been the sunset of that epoch, too. His followers have slavishly copied him, and what was beautiful has been burlesqued, what should have been an inspiration has become a model. Mr. Strachey has almost been obliterated by Stracheyism. It is a little difficult just now to see the mountain for the mole-hills.

But that is only because we are still too close to the mountain.

I know nothing in the history of literature quite so contemptible as the way in which scores of recent biographers have cribbed the last paragraph of Strachey's "Queen Victoria." Their want of self-respect has been well-nigh unbelievable. There can never have been, at any period, so many examples of unblushing plagiarism.

One worthy follower Mr. Strachey has had and only one—André Maurois—who has used Mr. Strachey's method without abusing it and has added an imaginative charm and kindly irony of his own that more than atone for any suggestion of imitation.

M. Maurois, however, is more interested in the story he has to tell than in the characters he has to portray. He hardly makes any attempt to recreate the subsidiary figures of his biographical romances. This places his work on a lower plane than Mr. Strachey's, the chief glory of which lies in the richness and completeness of its characterization. Every single character in "Eminent Victorians" and "Queen Victoria" is alive and unforgettable; and

the creation of character is the touchstone of supreme literary genius.

But we mustn't quarrel with M. Maurois because he isn't Mr. Strachey or because he isn't an Englishman (character-creation is the distinguishing feature of all our greatest achievements in literature). We must be thankful for the delightful ease and simplicity of his narrative style; for the exquisite construction of his "Ariel," which, quite apart from its biographical qualities, will stand comparison with the best novels of the time; for the delicious precision of his portrait of Disraeli, whose vague and enigmatic character has defied the skill of other writers; and, above all, for the absence from all his biographies of anything remotely resembling moral tone, or the least suspicion of superiority in the attitude of their author to his subjects.

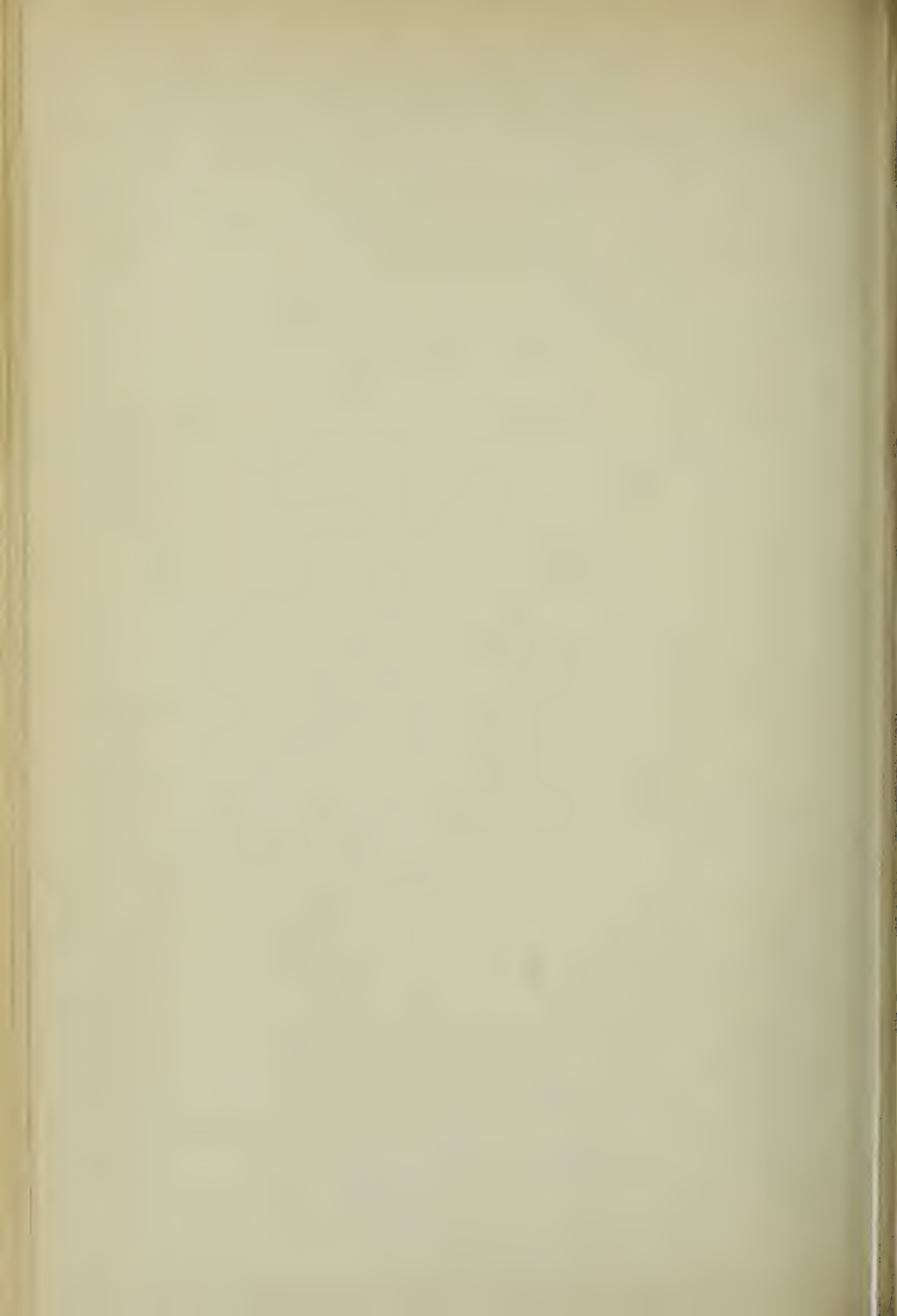
It is more than a little difficult at the present time for anyone to write biography without feeling and showing the influence of Mr. Strachey. Nevertheless M. Maurois has proved that it is possible to make an individual contribution to the art, that cheap imitation is a wretched return for benefits received. As for Mr. Strachey himself, he goes from strength to

strength. His latest work "Elizabeth and Essex" proves that he can move easily in any period. The portrait of Essex is better than that of Gordon in "Eminent Victorians," which is the same as saying that no other writer in English could have produced such a vivid, glowing picture of the man. He lives for ever in Mr. Strachey's pages—a new, rich, brilliantly coloured figure to add to our select gallery of great biographical portraits. Elizabeth is almost too good to be true, which is another way of saying that she is too good not to be true. She marches and dances and clowns and queens it through these entrancing pages with an astonishing, an incredible vitality. She is romantically conceived and realistically executed—like Shakespeare's Cleopatra. An unforgettable and well-nigh uncanny piece of recreation.

Bacon, too, is superb; he will live for the future as Mr. Strachey has painted him. Of the minor characters, the description of Raleigh lurking behind the door and Harington's reluctance to be "wracked on the Essex coast," will haunt the memory. And then there is Cecil, upon whom Mr. Strachey has conferred a fame more lasting than the fortune of

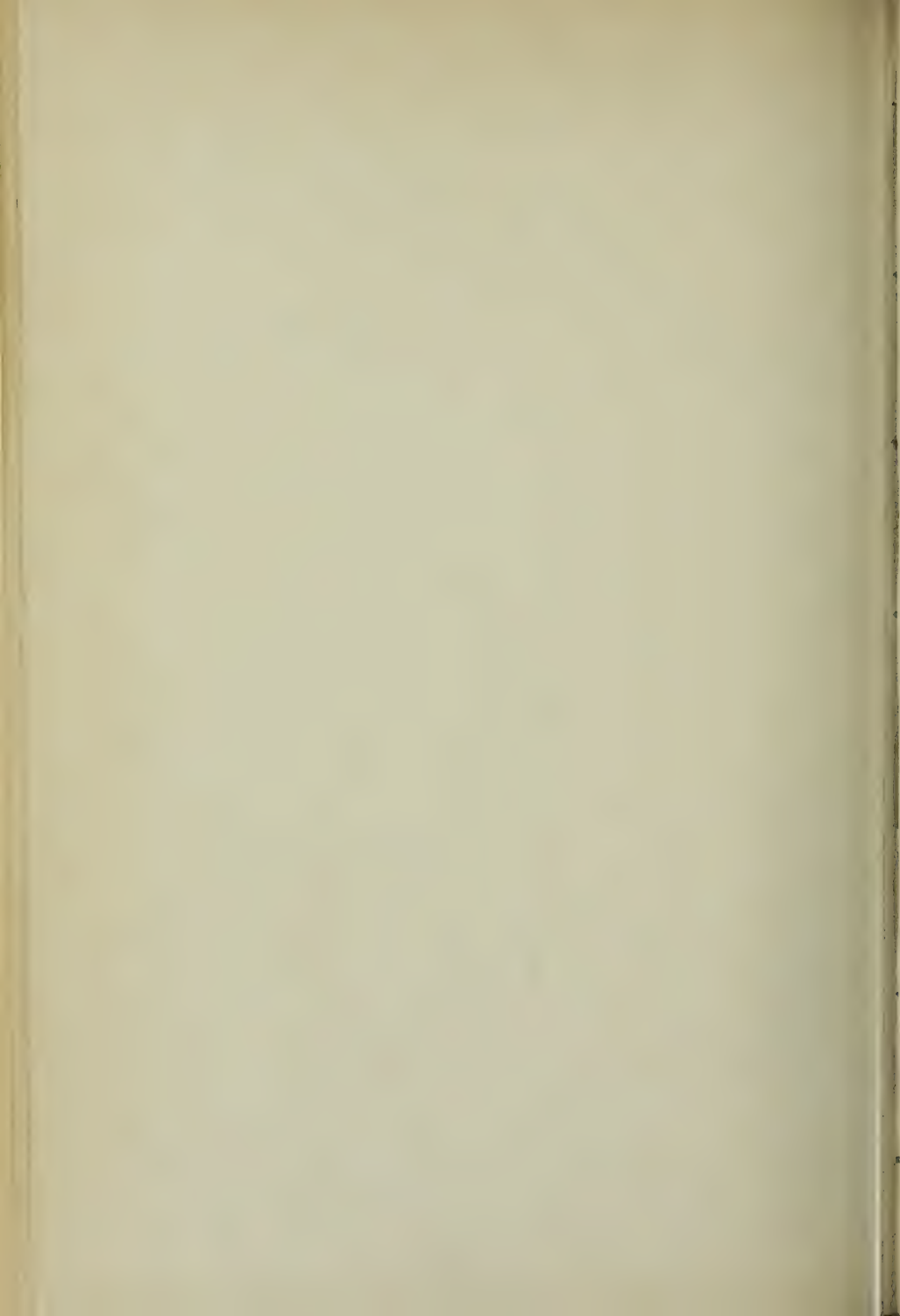
his house. By closing his book with Cecil's glimpse into the future, Mr. Strachey has neatly dished his followers, who are still busy cribbing the dying Victoria's glance over the past and applying it to their own creations, most of whom are still-born.

"Elizabeth & Essex" is Mr. Strachey's greatest work. It has a more searching irony than "Eminent Victorians," a more subtle beauty than "Queen Victoria." With his classically simple style Mr. Strachey has somehow managed to suggest the excitement and tumult of men and events far more successfully than any romantic historian, while the intuitive skill of his characterization is the despair of other biographers. The theme of the boon is universal, and whether regarded as a story or as a gallery of portraits, there is nothing in the whole range of British biography to compare with it as a work of art. With "Elizabeth & Essex" Mr. Strachey has managed to obliterate his imitators.



CHAPTER X

Raw Material of Biography



THE third decade of the twentieth century will probably be memorable in history as a period of irreconcilable opposites. Boredom and enthusiasm, uncertainty and conviction, peace and unrest, brutality and humanitarianism, belief and scepticism, democracy and dictatorship, greed and self-sacrifice, idealism and realism, bounding optimism and crawling pessimism—all these and a dozen other antitheses have found their extreme expression in the age following the four years' comparative concord that used to be called the Great War.

It is an age of young people who pose as being old and old people who pose as being young. Hence these contradictions. It is an age of superlatives and understatements, of exaggeration and meiosis, of italics and detachment, of crude splashes and elaborate designs. It knows everything and it knows nothing. It takes a scientific interest in biography and a sensational interest in "bloods." Sheer beauty and unredeemed ugliness jostle one another in the streets as never before. Mental lethargy and physical

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alertness distinguish its homes and its places of entertainment. Clearly an amusing age, an epoch of sorts, that has found its ultimate utterance in the rhythmical dissonance of Jazz, and its natural speech in the medley of memoirs, portraits, diaries, and reminiscences that have caused its Victorian elders so much heart-burning.

People have not yet begun to realize that the art of writing reminiscences is just as difficult and quite as rare as the art of writing romances. Indeed the two arts are in the same class; in both the facts of life are furbished-up. The incidents described in a first-rate book of reminiscences differ from the actual occurrences they purport to record as widely as the newspaper report of an interview differs from the interview itself. But while the former does, or ought to, reach the truth behind the facts, the latter does not concern itself with the truth and usually distorts even the facts.

Mr. Frank Harris once told me that memoirs are "a well-known form of fiction." He was quite right. Most memoirs are pure fiction, and bad fiction into the bargain; but the best modern memoirs are a late development of good fiction—that is to say,

they are creative in the best sense of the word. This is merely a variation of another aspect of literature—the representation of fact under the guise of fiction. Some of the best autobiography in the world has come to us in novel form, just as some of the best fiction in the world has come to us in the form of biography. Mr. Wells has introduced real people into an imaginative work. Mr. Strachey has allowed his imagination to play around real people.

Many critics pretend to resent this intrusion of fancy into the realm of fact. But no artist worth his salt is concerned with accuracy in detail if it doesn't happen to suit his purpose. By the mere process of selection he is forced to distort the facts as they would come from the pen of a reporter. If a writer were bound to record the sayings of a man with absolute veracity (assuming such a thing were possible at all) he would bury his subject; and in any case such a work could only be produced by someone with the soul of a stenographer and the mind of a memorialist.

The truth is that every good book of memoirs is largely creative. The conversations in it are never quite accurately reproduced. Indeed they would be

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boring if they were. For when conversation is used to reveal character, it should be more characteristic of the speaker than his actual everyday conversation. Very often, too, as I have shown, an imagined anecdote reveals a personality more clearly than a real anecdote.

No one person can see another with the eyes of a third. A and B write character-sketches of C; yet the portrait of C produced by A is utterly dissimilar from the portrait of C produced by B. Which is the truer? Obviously not the one that contains the greater number of incontrovertible facts, but the one that paints the more living picture. The picture as a mere surface "likeness" may be wrong in almost every detail; but it outlives the other because the imagination of the painter is more vital than the accuracy of the professor. Art, being experimental, is usually fallible on matters of fact. It is not concerned with the outward but with the inward truth of things. The path of art is strewn with unimportant errors.

All this must not be taken to mean that inaccuracy is preferable to accuracy in biographical work. I would always rather photograph a scene from actual

life if it revealed the actors as clearly and completely as a partly imagined scene. But unhappily it seldom does so, and consequently, in order to achieve essential truth, one often has to sacrifice the unessential facts.

Reminiscences are the raw material of biography. But, like "personal" biography, they must often be read between the lines. Exactly what one person says of another is not half so important to the biographer as a knowledge of the person who says it, and he will only gain such knowledge by a close study of what that person says, or leaves unsaid, about himself. "Personal" biography and reminiscences have as a rule told us far more about their writers than the people they have written about. For example, Carlyle's "Sterling" tells us much more about Carlyle than about Sterling; and there is a better portrait of Lady Oxford in her Autobiography (not the one consciously painted by herself, of course) than of any character she tries to portray.

But there is a further difficulty about reminiscences. They are usually written by people who are far more anxious to be talked about than to be truthful, and who do not therefore trouble to tell the

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truth even as they see it. The object of these writers is to explain to the world what splendid people they really are; they fill their books with portraits of themselves and their gifted relations at different ages and in various positions; and they seem to think the world cannot hear enough or too often about their friends, their families and themselves.

Thus it comes about that their books are chiefly written to glorify the class to which they belong, the family from which they sprang, and the friends to whom they are devoted—it being clear that the more they praise their class, their family and their friends, the more, by inference, they praise themselves. They have an air, these memoirists, of being candid and indiscreet; they relate much that is unimportant with an appearance of great frankness; they are sometimes downright, often spicy, frequently malicious at the expense of those who are not in their set, occasionally scandalous; but they are careful to keep truth at a respectful distance.

In recent years we have had some really quite appalling examples of these mutual-admiration, self-glorification reminiscences. They come under the general heading of "Clique-claque" memoirs.

No one, so far as I know, has drawn attention to this peculiarly modern manifestation of snobbery.

The consequence of this recent trend in memoir-writing is that when someone comes along with no axe to grind, no family to puff and no friends to advertise, he is greeted with a howl of horror from the "clique-claque" crowd, who of course have many journalistic friends to help them swell the chorus of vituperation. Truth-telling in their eyes becomes execrable taste, ghoulish garbage, and I don't know what else.

It is therefore extremely difficult for anyone who can contribute to the truth about personalities, and who is thoroughly disgusted by the fulsome lying twaddle written by their friends and relations, to print his honest opinions. Yet by not doing so he may be withholding material of the utmost value to some future biographer. It will be said that he can write it down for publication after his own death or the death of anyone who might be affected by it. But there are several objections to that. Firstly, being human, he may want to reap the financial reward of his work. Secondly, being human, he may want to reap the reward of recognition of his work.

Thirdly—and, from a biographical point of view, most important of all—if his work remains in obscurity until the death of his contemporaries, it cannot, from first-hand knowledge, be checked and sifted and valued and subjected to the criticism that all “personal” biography should undergo. This last objection seems to me vital and answers any criticism that may be directed against the motto of all honest memoirists: Truth in our time.

I think that the present appetite for outspokenness in memoirs and “lives” will grow, and the famous men of the future will live under far fiercer rays than those of the past. The inclination of the present age in favor of biographical candor has already resulted in a considerable diminution of the stature of many famous historical figures and made it almost impossible for a single contemporary figure to be described as great.

Yet we have not so much as peered into the abyss of truth. We still skirt it with the utmost care. We are afraid of it. The facts of human nature still frighten us. We are terrified of ourselves. Did even Mr. Strachey tell us the most revealing thing about

the Prince Consort? Has Sir H. F. Dickens let us into the secret of his famous father's closing years?

We are far too squeamish; we recoil with horror from ruthless revelations because we fear the same searchlight might suddenly be flashed upon ourselves and we couldn't face the scrutiny that would follow. We haven't even reached the point in human culture when a love of truth transcends a dread of looking foolish.

But this at least must be said. Any writer of reminiscences who does not expose himself as mercilessly as he exposes his subjects, who is afraid of appearing silly or weak or vain or lacking in good taste, is utterly unreliable and his work is worthless (except as read between the lines). The example of Boswell should have taught us that lesson. We believe in his fundamental honesty because of his self-exposure. And it is an excellent sign of the times that he is at last coming into his own, that he is being recognized as the most trustworthy writer of "personal" biography in the language. I think, too, that he will some day be recognized as a great creative artist, in certain respects second only to Shakespeare.

But the point here is that many of his contempo-

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raried thought of him as (what we should now call) a cad. A man is always called a cad by those whose taste differs from his. We all like to think we know what constitutes a gentleman, and so we call a man a cad whose behavior doesn't accord with our artificial standards of gentility.

Mr. Belloc once said: "Of the cads and gentlemen I have met, I would give the cads a shade of odds in the matter of salvation." I am not personally very much interested in the question of salvation; but if Mr. Belloc means that those whom the world calls cads are better company than those who call them so, I agree with him. All the Boswells of this world are cads in the eyes of the cowards who fear the truth; but what it all really amounts to is simply that their tastes in literature differ.

The latest well-known writer to raise a wail against our Boswells is Mr. Granville Barker. He stated not long ago that the whipping-post should be revived for the benefit of all those terrifying persons who write reminiscences and autobiographies. One can of course sympathize with Mr. Barker's view. The sudden burgeoning of literary ladies with spatepens makes the felicity of married public men dis-

tinctly precarious; while divorced public men are simply asking for trouble.

Nevertheless these purely personal considerations must perforce give way to the larger issues of history and literature. Scandal is the very stuff of history and has frequently inspired great literature. Perhaps Mr. Barker does not know that Boswell was ostracized by his generation and that his family were so upset by the current opinion of the local nobility and gentry on the scandalous nature of the biographer's revelations that they destroyed not a little of his laboriously collected material, for which the world now pants in vain. I'm afraid Mr. Barker would have joined in the hue and cry of that time and would have pilloried the author of the greatest "creation" since Falstaff.

From the Bible to Boswell the most readable things in English literature would scarcely have escaped the censure of a contemporary Barker. The most hotly contested point in the controversy that has raged about Shakespeare is not whether Hamlet was mad, but why Hamlet's creator left his wife his second-best bed; and it is no exaggeration to say that we'd far rather discover a bit of authentic

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scandal about him than the original manuscripts of his plays.

These little details, as Mr. Barker knows, are vitally important in the study of mankind. Indeed I cannot conceive what Mr. Barker himself would do without biography. It is the ruling passion of his life. Whenever he produces a play he tells each actor the entire family history, from the cradle, of the part he is interpreting, even suggesting that as a child the character under discussion suffered from whooping-cough, scarlet fever, two varieties of measles, and a severe bout of mumps. In fact he Boswellizes (and, I regret to say, talks scandal about) every single one of his creations—in the firm belief that only by knowing a certain person likes treacle with his porridge, or has an antipathy to cats, or adores the poetry of Gilbert Frankau, will an actor be able to do the individual stage-justice.

This mania for minutiae has become so much a part of his method that a well-known actor once ironically announced that he couldn't possibly get into the skin of the character he was studying unless he knew for certain whether the fellow lived at Peckham Rye or Tooting Bec!

I must give an illustration of Mr. Barker's method, recently vouchsafed me by a man who has been in a post-war Barker production. I have had to edit the biographical data slightly, because the man in question depends upon the stage for a living and does not pine for publicity in this connection; but what follows may be taken as a typical scene, faithfully reproduced in all its essentials.

"Now, my dear friend, I'm afraid you haven't the faintest, foggiest idea of the part," began Mr. Barker, taking his dear friend by the arm and walking him up and down the stage.

"Well," protested the actor, "I should hardly go so far as that—"

"You surprise me," from Barker; "you do indeed. You deprive me of breath. Do I understand you to say that you *have* got a faint and foggy idea of the part?"

"Well—er—I'm sorry if I failed, but I was trying hard to convey my conception. . . ." his sentence ended dismally.

"Were you? *Were* you now? How disappointing that your conception should have totally eluded me! My fault, no doubt. However, we must try to rem-

edy this distressing state of affairs. Now tell me: what, would you say, has been the past history of this man you are trying so hard to impersonate?"

"The past history?"

"Yes, dear friend, the past history."

"But surely ——" began the actor.

"Come, come," interrupted Barker; "you are not, I hope, going to tell me that the man drops from the skies, ready-made, at the moment you make your first entrance."

"Hardly that," laughed the actor, "but ——"

"Precisely!" said Barker; "hardly that. But—you must forgive me for saying so—no one would guess, from your reading of the part, that you had looked on the world for forty years and had actually seen and suffered things since you were weaned."

"I ——"

"You," Barker cut in, "had better listen to me."

The actor gave in and listened dutifully while the author-producer revealed several matters in the earlier career of the character in the play that had escaped the other's debilitated intuition:

"You must know, then, that this worthy soul was carried for over nine months before his mother was

brought to bed of him. Perhaps you hadn't realized that?"

The actor was forced to admit that he had not realized it, and he was beginning to wonder how he could suggest it in his performance when Mr. Barker proceeded:

"I felt sure you hadn't. Yet it is an important point, because delayed children are apt to be backward in brain development. The first really crucial event in his life occurred at the age of twelve, when he was sent to a public school as a boarder. Do you seize the significance of that?"

The actor regretted that he couldn't, without notice of the question, seize the full significance of that.

"Backward children, like forward children, are frequently unhappy at school," explained Mr. Barker. "The former are disliked by their masters, the latter by their mates. Normality is the key to popularity."

Mr. Barker paused to let this sink in, and then continued:

"The child, then, was unhappy at school. What

made matters infinitely worse was that his father played golf."

There was an awkward hiatus here, which the actor bridged as best he could by gurgling "Exactly!" But finding Mr. Barker's eye upon him, he pulled himself together and asked what a father's golf had to do with his child's education.

"A great deal," answered the biographical enthusiast. "Golfers are notoriously indifferent to anything but golf, and this man was utterly oblivious to his child's welfare."

This seemed a fairly satisfactory explanation, if still a little nebulous in its drift; so the actor quietly admitted the apathy of golfers when not on a links, and Mr. Barker pursued the career of the sportsman's unhappy progeny:

"At the age of eighteen the lad went into a city office. In many ways it was a great pity that he didn't enter a banking establishment. Had he done so, his future life would have been less complicated."

The actor agreed with his whole heart that it was a great pity; the situation, in his view, was already sufficiently complicated; but he merely nodded his head and said nothing.

"Instead, he went into a shipping office, where he rapidly developed that taste for travel which was to cause so much of his future trouble."

At this point the actor sighed heavily. Mr. Barker stopped, looked at him pityingly, and went on again:

"A year later he was offered the post of chief clerk in the cashier's department of a branch of the firm in South America. On the surface that may not appear important, but when I add that the branch was at Sao Paulo you will instantly perceive the profound influence it must have had on his future life."

Here Mr. Barker regarded the actor for several moments with an expression that said as clearly as words: "Now you're not going to tell me that you *don't* perceive it!" But the actor was already so hopelessly entangled in the experiences of the gentleman he had to portray, that he simply gulped and remained mute.

"Good!" said Mr. Barker. "Now that I have laid bare the main facts, you will be able to recommence your study along those lines. But whatever happens don't forget his eight years' residence in Sao Paulo."

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They were epochal. When you have completely absorbed the influences I have briefly hinted at, I will give you the rest of the story, which will considerably modify the impression you have just gained from what I have already said; but it is vitally necessary that you should not remain in ignorance of any outstanding incident in his life. You must make his soul-travail yours."

With these words, Mr. Barker made for the footlights; but a thought suddenly struck him. He turned round, called the actor, who was off in another direction at the rate of one who has suddenly remembered an important appointment, and gave him the benefit of the thought:

"Oh, and before I forget, he became a devotee of Balzac during his sojourn in the Brazilian port. His favourite book was 'La Cousine Bette.' You will find that very suggestive."

Mr. Barker then captured another performer and began another life-story. Meanwhile, his recent victim, feeling that he needed a little time to himself for reflection and absorption, made a bee-line for the nearest public house and swallowed three double whiskies in rapid succession, which was perhaps not

the worst way of getting into the skin of a man who had lived for eight years at Sao Paulo.

It is clear, I think, that Mr. Barker may be called the Boswell of producers.

But to return to that business of reading between the lines, which is one of the critic-biographer's most difficult tasks. Some little time back a work by Miss Viola Tree appeared, entitled "Castles in the Air." I happened just then to be interested in the personality of the late Lord Oxford, and there was a great deal about him in this book. So I sent a copy of it to Hugh Kingsmill, asking for his comments, as he had known several of the people mentioned in it. I give his reply in full:

Lucerne

June 28, 1926

My dear H. P.,

Many thanks for your letter. This book of Miss Viola Tree's shows Mr. Asquith from a new standpoint, so I'll give you my comments on it, in the hope that they may be of some use as a supplementary note to your portrait of that statesman.

The theme of "Castles in the Air" is the failure of Miss Tree to become an opera singer; and the story is unfolded in the letters which were exchanged dur-

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ing this critical period between her and her future husband, Alan Parsons.

Mrs. Asquith and Mrs. Patrick Campbell are Miss Tree's models in the art of autobiography, and she imitates, with a rather uncertain hand, their splendid outspokenness about everything flattering to their vanity, and their fine reticence in regard to other matters. The uncertainty of the imitation is shown in Miss Tree's account of her final collapse. This, though the note is overpitched, is sincere compared with anything in her models. There is, too, a peevish letter to her young sister, which neither Mrs. Asquith nor Mrs. Patrick Campbell would have sent to the printers; and when we read "Walter Creighton lent it (a house) to us; *at least we paid him a small stipend,*" we see the demon, Bombast, rushing out from the cave where he has been sucking the bones of Mrs. Asquith and Mrs. Patrick Campbell, to be tripped up, as he emerges, by the angel of youthful sincerity.

But when we come to Miss Tree's parents and friends, Bombast, and his half-witted progeny, Kind Thoughts and Heart-of-Gold, have it all their own way: witness "Mother and Father whom I love," "Mother's brilliant and gentle letters," "Daddy's great position," "My dear master at the Royal College of Music . . . he and his wife are still my greatest friends," "Patrick was full of concealed nobility," etc., etc.

This Patrick is Shaw-Stewart, and to get Mr. As-

quith fully, as exhibited in this book, something must be said of Miss Tree and Alan Parson's Balliol friends, Shaw-Stewart, Julian Grenfell, and Charles Lister. It is important to know a little about the young men who were sharing with the ageing statesman the privilege of her correspondence.

For some time after the armistice there was, as you know, a great output of biographies, commemorating the young men who had been killed in the war. A certain group, which included Rupert Brooke, Shaw-Stewart, Lister, Horner, and the two Grenfells, was picked out for special notice, not only in the form of memoirs, but in printed and spoken references from prominent politicians, and of course from Mrs. Asquith and Mrs. Patrick Campbell. Both Churchill and Birkenhead have released in praise of certain members of this group a sensibility which could not have been indulged with prudence in the commerce of ordinary life; and Mr. E. B. Osborn placed this particular group in the forefront of his "New Elizabethans."

Legends flower naturally out of early and heroic deaths, and no one would go out of his way to examine the reverse side of such legends. Everyone has heard of the magnificent deaths of the two Grenfells, and most people know Julian Grenfell's "Into Battle," one of the few good war poems written by a combatant.

Miss Tree has now thrust the reverse side of this legend upon the public. A glance at it is, therefore,

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unavoidable. She tells us that Patrick Shaw-Stewart, Julian Grenfell, and Charles Lister "all loved me without being in the least in love with me," and in her sympathy "for those who had the miserable misfortune of not knowing them" she admits us to their correspondence with her. (It is a pity, by the way, that she has no love letters to include from the wit of that group, Ronald—now Father—Knox.)

Here are two extracts from Shaw-Stewart's correspondence: "There are thousands of New College and Magdalen and Cambridge men in the world; and no doubt you can draw them all by raising your little finger or your fern-like toe, but there are jolly few like me even in Balliol (said he with arrogance but perfect truth)."

And "We elected three miserable specimens (as Fellows of All Souls), but no one jolly was in; and anyhow by the strenuous efforts of me and one or two others, the election of a Polish Jew from Balliol, much the strongest candidate really, was prevented."

You will agree with me that the successful issue of this academic pogrom might have been communicated to someone more suitable than the daughter of Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree and the niece of Mr. Max Beerbohm.

And here is Julian Grenfell—"I swear that all of you are without doubt 'The Superior People' of history. . . . England can never sink while we've got a king

like good King E. and while it's inhabited by a few such as us."

The Old Elizabethans were probably very like the New Elizabethans, but it is clear that these quotations do not equal their authors with the ideal image of the young Elizabethan nobleman given us by Shakespeare, and present no doubt to Mr. E. B. Osborn in that happy hour when he hit on the title of his book.

Even had Shakespeare's Verona been a peaceful place, and the leading young men all on excellent terms with one another, I cannot see Mercutio and Tybalt and County Paris and Benvolio wasting their warm and golden youth over their friend Romeo's future wife, in correspondence of this order—

"While Escalus, chaste-living Escalus,
Rules in Verona, and while Capulet
And Montague and all the Tybalt lot,
And you and I and County Paris, bless him,
With Friar Laurence to supply our japes,
Inhabit here, Verona cannot sink.
God 'ield thee, dear one, and thy fern-like toe—
Oh, and remember me to Romeo."

I should add that the letters Miss Tree quotes from Charles Lister do not in any way impair the very attractive impression of his character made by everything recorded about him.

Now for Mr. Asquith. The public's image of him is a venerable scholar-statesman, married to a brilliant unconventional society woman, but otherwise solid.

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Ever since I heard that Balzac was his favourite author, I suspected this image. When Mrs. Asquith published her Autobiography, Mr. Asquith was popularly supposed to be suffering acute but reticent agony. I doubted this, for unqualified admirers of Balzac are generally connected with the poetry and richness of life chiefly through a beglamorment by the gimcrack in life. It seemed to me quite possible that he regarded the Autobiography with feelings that varied according to his mood; the debased Balzacian approving, the cool, self-interested politician dismayed. This view of him as a would-be romantic hampered by a wide-awake opportunist is confirmed by these letters, which he wrote in his late fifties to the youthful goddess of the group I have just briefly sketched.

Here we have him in Balzacian vein—"Dearest Viola, I went to pay my visit to the Palace, and came away quite content. Then I went and lunched with another king! (Doesn't it sound grand?) This time, unfortunately, only an Ex-, and an exile! Poor little Manuel—late of Portugal."

Here we have the lucid and careful lawyer superimposed on the romantic, the result being an unexpected echo of Falstaff—"Wendell Holmes says somewhere that of all the senses—sight, hearing, touch, etc.—the one which most vividly awakens or recalls associations is smell. The smell of green fresh bracken will always bring back to me" (Compare "Henry IV, Part I," Act II, Scene 4: "There is a thing, Harry, which thou

hast heard of, and it is known to many in our land by the name of pitch; this pitch, as ancient writers do report, doth defile.”)

And here we have the politician, alert at the smell, not of green fresh bracken, but of danger—but before I close with him, I must show you Jowett’s most promising pupil, as revealed in the following choice of phrases from the storehouse of English literature and current journalism: “Human nature’s daily food,” “far away on the billow,” “flames in the forehead of the morning sky,” “fish, flesh, fowl,” “one foot on sea, and one on shore,” “fit, if few,” “Que voulez-vous?” “moves in a mysterious way,” “without haste or rest,” “The Potter’s Wheel,” “creeps in its petty pace from day to day,” “All sorts and conditions of men,” “More light,” “the abhorred shears,” “fearful and wonderful thing,” “the woods decay, the woods decay and fall.”

He has his own style, too: “I am vis-à-vis of your present fortunes and your immediate future, wholly désorienté.” We do not get much of this, and so may be, as he would put it, “thankful for small mercies.”

But to return to the politician. In a letter dated August 5, Miss Tree writes to Alan Parsons to say that “Mr. Asquith has evidently ‘espoused’ our cause, because all through lunch he asked me about the Civil Service Exam questions—when the results would be out, etc., and he was very, very kind.”

On August 8, Miss Tree advises Alan Parsons “to play in a foursome with Mr. Asquith or a single with

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Margot. I really think this wise, as he doesn't even know you, in case you get anywhere near into the Civil Service."

On August 23, Mr. Asquith writes to Miss Tree: "Unlike so many others you don't 'cheapen Paradise.' Do you know where that comes from? Perhaps I will write it out for you."

On September 3, Mr. Asquith, possibly after partnering Alan Parsons in a foursome, does write it out for Miss Tree, and it runs:

"Ah! foolish woman—she who may
On her sweet self set her own price;
Knowing he cannot choose but pay,
How has she cheapened Paradise."

"Of course," he adds, "it (cheapening Paradise) is a thing not to do, and I said you didn't do it."

On September 26, Alan Parsons hears that he has not done sufficiently well in the examination to be given a post in the Home Civil.

On September 28, Miss Tree writes to A. P. to say she has received the following telegram from Mr. Asquith: "Much sympathy, be of good courage, writing, Asquith."

On September 29, a letter arrives from Mr. Asquith: "I'm afraid I can't do anything, as these matters are regulated by Rhadamanthine rules. . . . Courage! 'Le Diable est mort,' as the Burgundian says in 'The Cloister and the Hearth' . . . my thoughts are con-

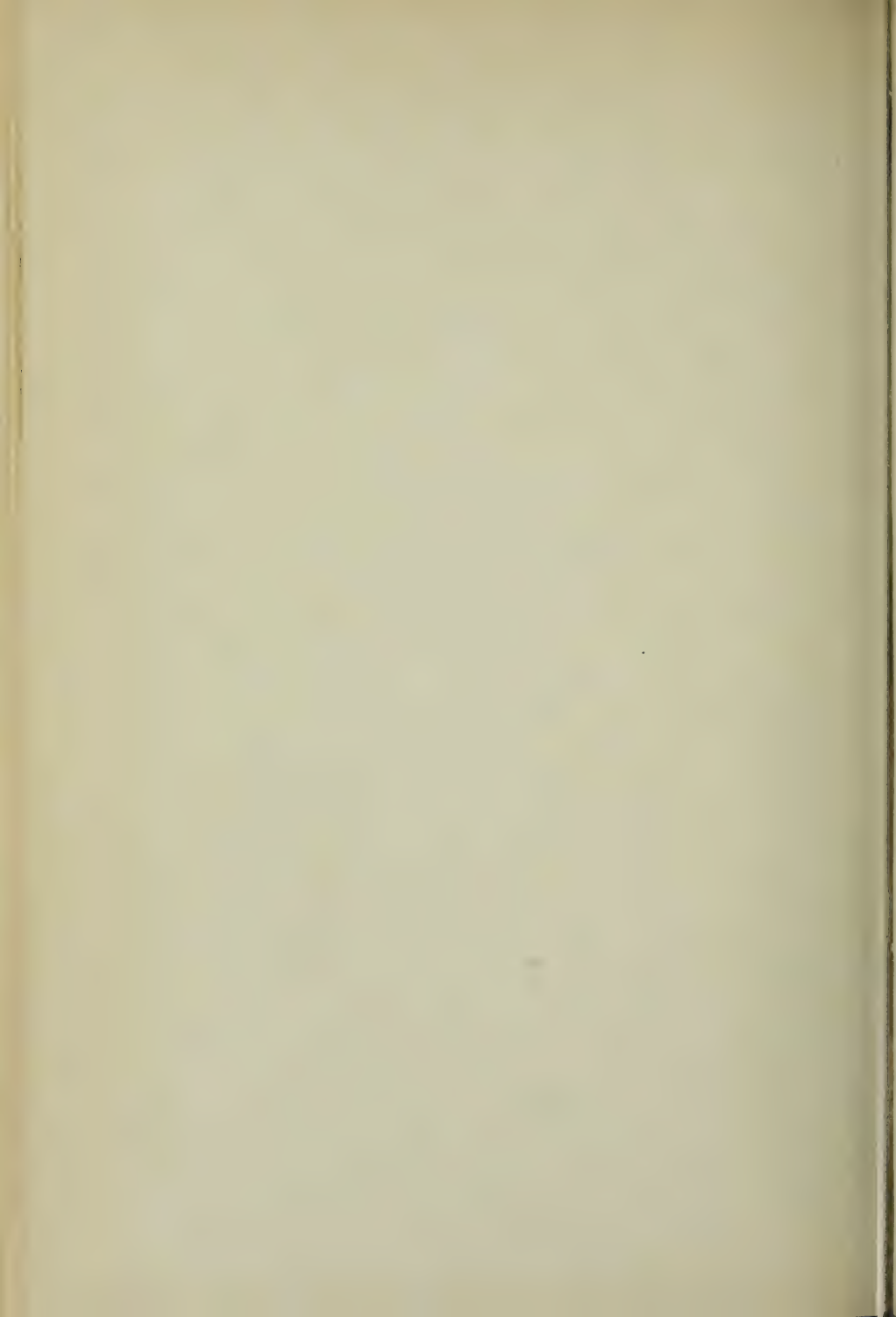
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stantly with you in *your* troubles, as yours were with me in *mine*. And I know you won't 'cheapen Paradise.' ”

And on October 8, the crisis over, he sheathes his sword, sighing “Thank you for your two nice letters. I am glad you found some comfort in mine.” Let us leave him there, in his rent-free Paradise.

Yours ever,

HUGH KINGSMILL



CHAPTER XI

Creative Biography

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THERE are very few great creative biographies in the world. The reason for this is clear enough. No man, except perhaps Plato, has ever definitely used biography as a medium for self-expression—and purely creative biography is the expression of one man's personality through that of another.

The classic examples of creative biography are Plato's portrait of Socrates, the portraits of Christ by the four writers known as the Evangelists, and, I would add, Boswell's portrait of Johnson—though the last is not yet generally admitted to be creative. Among these, only Plato, I fancy, threw objective portraiture overboard and made his subject his own mouthpiece.

To my mind, Boswell is the greatest of all, but then I cannot read Plato and the Gospels in the original. Neither Socrates nor Christ is made as actual to us as Johnson is; they are too abstract; if we met them we wouldn't instantly recognize them as old friends, as we certainly would Johnson. But there is such "personality" in the mere use

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of words that we probably lose a great deal of a man's character when his familiar conversation is translated; so I would hesitate to give an opinion on the biographical value of Plato's books and the Four Gospels.

In a previous chapter I have briefly discussed what I believe to be Boswell's biographical method, and I now wish to make a personal confession. I have used that method myself in "reporting" conversations and in retailing anecdotes for the purpose of portraying character.

When my book "Modern Men and Mummers" was published in 1921, it received a good deal of praise and a good deal of the other thing. What chiefly amused me was that in some quarters I was praised as a reporter and blamed as a critic. That is to say, I was praised for being able to record the sayings of other men and blamed for being unable to say anything myself worth recording. I remember that Mr. George Sampson, a critic for whom I have a genuine admiration, asserted roundly that I couldn't write for toffee, but that I was a first-rate reporter. And *The Times* declared that my portrait of Sir Herbert Tree, which consisted chiefly

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of anecdotes and conversations, was more life-like than anything in the "official" biography, which contained the work of such masters as Mr. Bernard Shaw, Mr. Max Beerbohm, and Mr. Edmund Gosse.

Most people are so woefully uninstructed in this matter of character-portrayal in biography, or, as I should term it, character-creation, that I don't really feel equal to the task of instructing them. They should at least be told that a great deal of it is done by inspiration, divination, or whatever else they like to call it. Thus, when the portrait is finished, the artist is only partly conscious of where fact ends and fancy begins. I myself believe so thoroughly in the truth-to-life of my "Herbert Tree" that if I were put on oath as to the absolute accuracy of its details, I should find it practically impossible to state where precisely my imagination had parted from my memory. This much, however, I can say—Tree was alive with me the whole time I was writing about him, and as I jotted the sentences down I could hear his nasal purr in their very pronunciation.

I had, while engaged at his theater, soaked myself in Treeisms. By using his vocal inflections, I

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could tell exactly how he would say a thing; and after studying him fairly closely, I knew pretty well what he would say under any given circumstances. All the circumstances were of course given me, and I think I made the most of them. Where my conscious memory failed, my intuitive faculty had little difficulty in bridging the gap. My portrait of him is therefore creative and fundamentally true, and I am grateful to the critics who praised what they were pleased to term my ability as a reporter, even though some of them were quite convinced that I couldn't write anything worth reading out of my own head.

I have already remarked that Dr. Johnson was an ideal subject for creative portrayal. Tree was another. He had a bizarre and whimsical character, possessed of just those idiosyncrasies and eccentricities that are a spur and inspiration to the imaginative biographer—the sort of man about whom stories are told and invented. I have never ceased wondering why he was the subject of such a dull book as the “official” biography, edited by (of all people!) Mr. Max Beerbohm.

I do not know anyone who can write livelier reminiscences than Mr. Beerbohm; yet, with the best

subject to hand he could ever have had in his life, he failed to produce anything but a thick volume of tedious panegyric and orthodox obituary. Wading through it was, for me, a dismal experience.

I once met "Max." It was not a very exciting meeting, but I think I can make an account of it a little more exhilarating than any of the personal touches in that saddening compilation about his half-brother. Let me try.

The scene was Sir Herbert Tree's outer dressing-room at His Majesty's Theatre. Tree had asked me in the street to tell his half-brother that he was going straight to the Carlton for lunch, where he hoped "Max" would join him at once.

When I entered the room "Max" was standing before a long mirror and regarding himself in a distant, aloof, "Have-we-been-introduced?" sort of way. I felt that he was on the point of apologizing to himself for having been, in ever so slight a degree, a little too familiar with himself. He was alone, and though he noticed my arrival he neither turned round nor appeared to be conscious of my presence.

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I, being rather nervous, cleared my throat loudly and made a sound like:

“Er ——”

“Max” steadfastly looked at himself in the glass, motionless and speechless. I made a gallant attempt:

“Are you Mr. Beerbohm?” I said.

My nervousness overcame me when I got as far as his name, and it came out with a strong accent on the “Beer.”

Still no answer. But I persevered, and a German would have envied my pronunciation at the second attempt.

“Have you a warrant for my arrest?” came the unexpected response from the figure before the looking-glass.

As he made no sign of turning round, a slight irritation got the better of my nerves, and I said, perhaps a little too emphatically:

“No.”

He gave an affected start, the least suggestion of a shudder, and asked another question:

“Have you brought your handcuffs?”

“No,” from me, almost in a shout.

"Then I will come quietly," said he, facing me at last.

Being used to this kind of thing at His Majesty's Theatre, and assuming that eccentricity ran in the family, I delivered my message without more ado.

"Sounds like an ultimatum," was all he said as he walked towards the door. Then, when he reached it, he threw over his shoulder:

"Thank you, constable"—and disappeared.

At last I saw what he was driving at. My manner had, I suppose, been too stentorian from the first. Even that "Er" with which I had commenced operations, must have smacked too much of Bow Street for the genteel taste of this "Beau." In trying to be polite I had reminded him of the police. When I told Tree later in the day what had occurred, his only comment was:

"Ah! you should have laughed."

The conflict between wit and gentility that has always raged in "Max's" breast was perfectly illustrated on one occasion. He was at a dinner-party where the subject of conversation at his end of the table was the wife of a famous politician, who has received such a lot of publicity that I cannot be pre-

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vailed upon to mention her name here. Someone said:

"She's quite a nice person, really, and would be a rattling good sort if only she didn't let her tongue run away with her."

"You are right," cut in "Max," "but what a pity none of her admirers is public-spirited enough to follow the tongue's admirable example!"

This remark was of course repeated, and after dinner an acquaintance went up to "Max" to compliment him on its cleverness. But by that time "Max" was beginning to realize that his own tongue had points in common with that of the lady who inspired his witticism, and he was suffering from a slight attack of tact. He therefore answered:

"You are mistaken. I never said that"; adding, with a touch of the humor that never forsakes him for long, "what's more, I don't think it at all clever!"

From "Max" it is an easy transition to the late Sir Herbert Tree. Since the publication of my portrait of him I have been asked by people on both sides of the Atlantic to write his biography. I'm afraid I cannot do this, for the excellent reason

that I don't know enough about him. Nor would I get any outside assistance from those who knew him well, for they were so scandalized by the truth of the portrait I have already painted that not one of them would help me to obtain those intimate materials which alone would make his biography worth writing.

However, for the sake of those who have expressed their appreciation of my first study, I have here thrown together all that I can still vividly remember of the man. And this must be my final contribution to the biography of perhaps the most original and magnetic personality that ever adorned the English stage.

Stories about Tree are legion, and the amazing thing is that quite half of them are true. Here are several additions to the common stock.

One day he left the theatre eagerly scanning the morning's correspondence. A cab was waiting at the stage-door, the driver of which knew his home address. He got in, his eyes riveted to the letters, which continued to hold his attention throughout the journey. The cab pulled up at his house. Deep

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in his correspondence, Tree stepped out, walked up to the front door, rang the bell, and waited, still absorbed in what he was reading.

The door opened. A maid-servant stood in the entrance.

"Come in," said Tree mechanically, and walked back to the cab.

The servant was fully aware of his absent-minded habits, and waited at the door for his return when the cabby had pointed out his error. But the cabby, with a fine eye to business, also knew of his freaks, and the moment Tree was comfortably settled in the cab again he whipped up the horse and started back to the theatre.

Arrived at the stage-door, Tree entered the theatre, without apparently the least suspicion of what had passed since he had left it, and went upstairs to dictate answers to his letters. The cabby got his money for the two journeys from one of the theatre officials and remained within call for Tree's reappearance. After which he took him home again. It was a bad day for London cabbies when Tree bought his own motor-car.

Rehearsals at His Majesty's were extraordinary. They were often terribly long, but they were also sometimes lively. Tree himself was usually the centre of fun, but occasionally someone else supplied the entertainment—as, for instance, when Saint-Saëns supervised the rendering of his own music to a play by Brieux, "False Gods." It was, I am told, the funniest thing imaginable to hear the famous composer and Tree's musical director, Adolphe Schmidt, spluttering at one another for minutes at a time. Tree used to sink back into his seat and try to smother himself with a pocket handkerchief.

The climax came one day when both Frenchman and German were more than usually inarticulate. Saint-Saëns rushed on to the stage, and, spreading his hands out before him in an agony of expostulation, hissed the following at Schmidt:

"Ze flutes! Ze flutes is too loud!"

The conductor glared back at him, and, doing his best to suppress the scream of rage that was almost choking him, retorted:

"'Ow shall flutes play more softly as dey can?"

Nothing daunted, the distinguished Frenchman frenziedly proclaimed:

"But zey do!"

Whereupon rehearsals were suspended for the day . . .

I think it is axiomatic that no one who produces a play should act in it himself. The actor cannot possibly give the necessary attention to his part if he is worried about external matters. That was why Tree so seldom did himself justice as an actor—particularly in his more ambitious productions.

I was present at a dress-rehearsal of "Macbeth" when he was more that usually worried over the technicalities of the business. After the murder of *Duncan*, *Macbeth* has to explain why he killed the grooms of the king's chamber. This is how Tree explained it:

"Who can be wise, amazed, temperate, and furious,
Loyal and neutral, in a moment? No man:"

("Keep that light steady! What's he doing with it?")

"The expedition of my violent love

Outran the pauser reason. Here lay Duncan."

("No, he's dead! Don't worry about him. Keep

the light on me—on my face, not my legs. Thank you. Words, please.”)

“Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin laced with his golden blood,
And his gash’d stabs look’d like a breach in nature
For ruin’s wasteful entrance: there, the murderers,”

(“For God’s sake, don’t fidget! This is a terrible scene. You should feel rooted to the spot. Words, please.”)

“there, the murderers.”

(“Think of that!—the *murderers!*”)

“Steep’d in the colors of their trade, their daggers
Unmannerly breech’d with gore:”

(“They won’t be able to see me from that box!
Will that gentleman oblige me? Thank you. Words, please.”)

“Who could refrain ——”

(“I wish you’d refrain from wobbling those lights!”)

“That had a heart to love, and in that heart ——”

(“I don’t see terror or pity on anyone’s face. I want everyone, please, to appear stricken—*stricken*, as well as rooted!”)

“and in that heart
Courage to make’s love known?”
 (“Now we’ll do that again. Words, please.”)

Here are a few of Tree’s scattered sayings, all flung out in the course of conversation with me or in my hearing.

A fellow complained one day of stomachache. Tree said:

“You should live in a hotel. Indigestion is the result of family life. People bolt their food in the domestic circle.”

A company of Sicilian actors, headed by Signor Grasso, took London by storm, and Tree went to see them in “Othello.” Grasso’s performance of the *Moor* was in its way a tour de force. There was no restraint about it—a sweeping, hurricanal exhibition of epileptic passion. He gnashed his teeth, foamed at the mouth, and generally speaking quite forgot his drawing-room manners.

“Very fine, very remarkable,” commented Tree, “but hardly Shakespeare’s conception. You see, Grasso’s *Othello* would never have owned a pocket handkerchief.”

He was always ready to give helpful hints to an actor who was struggling to get into the skin of a part. I remember a typical piece of advice:

"I want you to suggest . . . ht . . . pt . . . well, you know, don't you? . . . a cross between a whitebait and a marmoset."

I forget the circumstances that gave rise to the following remarks, but somehow they have stuck in my memory:

"English domestic morality is founded on the axiom that boys will be boys, but that girls mustn't be girls."

"The national sport of England is obstacle-racing. You have only to enter the average Englishman's home to realize the fact. People fill their rooms with useless and cumbersome furniture, and then spend the remainder of their lives in trying to dodge it."

I recall a story he told about a certain supper-party in the Dome of His Majesty's. Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd George had witnessed the performance that night and were the guests of honor. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, as L.G. then was, had drawn

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the actor-manager into a discussion on the art of make-up and facial expression.

"I particularly noticed," said L.G., "that moisture appeared in your eyes during an emotional passage. Can you do that every night?"

"Did you also happen to notice that I hid my face in my arms just before the passage you speak of?" asked Tree.

"No, I didn't," the Chancellor admitted; "but what has that to do with it?"

"Only this," answered the actor—"I was able during those few seconds to transfer some of the contents of a tube of vaseline from my pocket to the corners of my eyes."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed L.G.—"what a fake!" And he roared with laughter.

"Is it more of a fake," probed Tree, "than the forced tears of an actor who can work himself up into a condition that tickles his lachrymal gland?"

"Or of an orator, you would like to add?" said the other.

"I never voice my suspicions," countered Tree.

"Well, I don't mind admitting that I can cry to

command," continued the Chancellor, "but it isn't always easy. One has to be in a melting mood." Then, turning to his wife, he added: "Don't forget, dear; when I'm not in form, a spot of vaseline on a spare handkerchief!"

The discussion went on, and by the end of it Mr. Lloyd George had learnt all the tricks of Tree's trade.

"I never met a man," mused the actor, "who took such a keen interest in my art. I hope he isn't thinking of going on the stage. Like *Bottom*, he'd want to play all the parts."

And now, with a final scene, I must bid farewell to Tree.

One evening, during the run of "David Copperfield," I called at His Majesty's, on behalf of a Society of which I was then the Secretary, to ask Tree for the loan of his theatre some afternoon in the coming month. I was duly ushered into his dressing-room, shook hands with him, and stated the reason for my visit. While I spoke he subsided wearily into a chair. He was still in the clothes and make-up of *Micawber*.

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"Have you seen 'David Copperfield'?" he asked, taking no notice of my request.

ME: No.

TREE: Then you must see it.

ME: I should like to.

TREE: So should I.

ME: (*after a pause*) Do you think you will be able to lend us your theatre?

TREE: (*looking dreamily at me*) Have you seen "David Copperfield"?

ME: I said "no."

TREE: Then you must see it.

ME: Yes, I said I should like to see it.

TREE: So should I.

ME: Will you please give an answer to my question?

TREE: (*in Falstaff's voice*) Upon compulsion? Never!

ME: I said "please," Sir Herbert.

TREE: I heard you.

ME: (*taking up my hat*) Am I to understand —?

TREE: Silence! (*To his dresser*) Conduct this gentleman to the Dome, and give him a drink.

I knew it was useless to protest—besides, I wanted the loan of his theatre—so I allowed myself to be put into the lift. Just as we were about to ascend, Tree poked his head round the corner, and said to the dresser:

“Explain to the gentleman, after he is pacified with a drink, that if he had seen ‘David Copperfield’ he would not have come at the fall of the curtain and asked for a thing I am too tired to refuse. . . . Take great care of him. The last man who used this lift was killed instantaneously, owing to a habit it has acquired of dropping, quite suddenly, from the top floor to the bottom, just as one is about to step out. . . . Good luck!”

We reached our destination safely, and at the dresser’s bidding I made myself at home.

Tree used to spend a good portion of every day in the Dome of His Majesty’s Theatre. I believe he often slept there as well. He certainly gave most of his supper-parties there. It consisted (and I suppose still consists) of two rooms, though there was probably a bedroom as well.

One of these rooms was very large and reeked of mediaevalism. By which I mean that tapestries,

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armor, swords, and similar lethal and baronial objects were conspicuous on its walls; and a long table, of the refectory or feudal system variety, occupied the center of the floor.

From this one passed into a smaller, though still sufficiently airy, compartment, which was got up drawing-room fashion, with all the latest Tottenham Court Road comforts.

In about twenty minutes Tree joined me, asked me to excuse him while he read some letters, and went to his desk. Five minutes passed in silence thus. At last he spoke again:

"Sit down," he said.

As I was already seated, I was unable at the moment to follow his trend of thought. But, on looking up, I saw another man in the room—a tall, big-boned, clean-shaven man. He nodded at me and sat down. I nodded back, handed him a paper, and went on turning over mine.

At last Tree finished, said "Ah!" several times in succession, and flung himself into a roomy chair between us.

"Consider yourselves introduced," said he, looking at the ceiling, "because I only remember one of

your names, and that wouldn't be fair on the other. This gentleman," he continued, addressing me, "represents an influential section of the New York press, and he wants me to tell him a lot of things about myself to prepare America for my second coming. That is chiefly why I asked you up here. You shall do the telling. I have nothing further to say."

He lay right back in his chair, closed his eyes, and gave an immediate impression of being fast asleep.

I gazed at the American and he gazed at me. For several seconds neither of us spoke. Then he addressed the somnolent figure of the actor-manager:

"See here, Sir Beerbohm Tree; I didn't come to be intro-jooiced to our young friend here, though I'm very glad to be acquainted with him. I want something bright and crisp about yourself to tell our folk on the other side. If you're played out, just say the word, and I'll pop in again when you're feeling spry."

One of Tree's eyes opened slowly. "Oh, God!"

he murmured. The other eye followed suit. "Oh, Manhattan!" he whispered.

This was too much for the American. He took out his note-book and made several entries, reading each aloud as he put it down:

"Great actor sends greetings to U.S. Pines for God's own country. Never happy since leaving Manhattan."

Tree at once entered into the spirit of the thing. Springing from his chair, he began walking about the room, dictating as he went, and warming to his work with many exclamations and gesticulations:

"For what are the United States? The answer is clear to anyone who has more than a pedant's knowledge of history. They are states that have been united. Why have they been united? A simple question, that nevertheless demands a careful reply. They have been united because they did not want to be separated. The point naturally arises: would they have benefited by a separation? No! a thousand times No! Why? Because they would no longer have been the United States. That, in brief, is its political history. I pause before I go on. What is its

(forgive the professionalism) its apparent make-up? What is its social aspect? The reverse, I think, of its political aspect. The United States of a Disunited People, a Nation of Internationals, a Cosmic Chaos, a ——”

At this point the American, who up to now had been too busy with pencil and note-book to think seriously of what he was putting down, tumbled to the fact that his leg was being pulled. He looked steadily at Tree for a moment, then closed his note-book with a loud snap, reached for his hat, and stood up.

I was so interested in his movements that Tree's further discourse escaped me, though I still heard the soft, purring voice rising and falling.

When the American at length interrupted him, the subject of canned meat was occupying his attention. At least I caught a distinct reference to Chicago, pigs, porcupines, and (though the connection here was a trifle vague) trouser buttons.

It was at this instant that the Yankee cut in, with the following curt and carefully-chosen words:

“Thank you, Sir Tree; thank you very much. You've got a fine place up here; but I hope you

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don't spend much time on the balcony outside. It's a long drop to the street; and they haven't got padded pavements—yet. Good-night, sir. Good-night, mister.”

And with a nod to each of us, he turned sharply on his heel and left the room.

“How curious!” mused Tree, as the sound of the American's footsteps died away; “how curious! I never thought of that. . . . Padded pavements! . . . The orange-peel would lose its terror.”

CHAPTER XII

Taste in Biography

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PICTURE to yourself a weary but hopeful youth toiling up Arkwright Road, Hampstead, on a boiling hot day a year or two before the war. Almost at the top he reaches a tall, imposing house on the left-hand side of the road, stands mopping his brow for a minute before ringing the front-door bell, and eventually comes to rest in a drawing-room, the upholstery of which looks so warm and stuffy that he almost begins to sweat again.

He has come to see a famous playwright on a matter of business that need not detain you. Incidentally, he is anxious to see the famous playwright for the sake of his plays, quite apart from the business. He wonders what the famous playwright will be like. He wonders whether the famous playwright can be induced to talk about his plays; or whether, like so many famous playwrights, he is modest about his own achievements.

A period is put to his idle speculations by a knock at the door.

"Come in," he says.

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There enters at once a shortish gentleman, with a neat, pointed, white-streaked beard, and the general appearance of a genial farmer. He goes straight up to the youth, shakes hands with him, asks him to sit down and remains standing himself.

"Damn!" says the youth to himself—"another visitor! Now I shan't get Henry Arthur to myself."

"What a lovely day!" says the bearded gentleman.

The youth agrees that it is a lovely day, adding that if anything it is a bit too lovely for hill-climbing.

The genial gentleman laughs and says:

"You ought to have come by the tube; then it would have been a downhill walk."

There are a few more pleasant interchanges relative to the advantages and disadvantages of living on a hill. Then the youth says:

"I suppose you came by tube?"

"I very often use the tube," answers the gentleman.

"I mean this morning," persists the youth.

"This morning?" uncomprehendingly from the gentleman.

"Yes, this morning."

"I don't quite ——"

"I beg your pardon. How silly of me! It didn't strike me that you probably live in Hampstead."

The gentleman looks at the youth, in the manner that one looks at a mentally-defective being, curiously and pityingly. After an awkward pause:

"What do you want to see me about?" he asks.

The youth, during the same pause, does some pretty rapid thinking. His thoughts run on these lines: Perhaps the gentleman is Mr. Jones's secretary. No, too old for that. Or a brother. No, because he would say so. Or some other relation. No, for the same reason. Or someone staying in the house. No, for ditto. Also, not one of these possible people would have knocked at the door. Then can it possibly be Mr. Jones himself? Preposterous notion! No man ever knocks at the door of his own drawing-room.

He is so absorbed in his train of conjectures that the gentleman has to repeat the question:

"What do you want to see me about?"

"I—I—" comes haltingly from the youth.

"Oh, perhaps I should have told you my name,"

the gentleman breaks in: "I am Henry Arthur Jones."

The youth gasps, murmurs his apologies, says "How silly of me!" again, but utterly fails to keep his mind off the knocked door. Again the gentleman has to remind him that he is there on business.

Somehow—he can never remember how—the business is discussed and concluded. The knocked door crops up at every stage and he catches himself at one point in the discussion executing at rat-a-tat-tat on his knees with his knuckles.

However, he has partially recovered by the time the business is finished, and he decides to get Mr. Jones to talk about himself. Fortunately there is a subject to his hand. A comedy by Mr. Jones is running at the Playhouse Theatre, and some strange individual with a stranger name has written to protest against the strange use in Mr. Jones's play of such a strange name as his. Since his name is so strange, he argues that Mr. Jones must have heard of him and probably had him in mind when he drew the character in the play.

The youth, therefore, asks Mr. Jones what he is going to do about it.

"Half a moment," says Mr. Jones, and dashes out of the room, leaving the door open.

This omission is not lost on the youth, who strolls quietly across the room and shuts it, saying in an undertone as he does so: "Oh, no, you don't!" He is most anxious to verify an earlier incident that is still troubling him mightily.

In less than a minute there is a perfectly audible knock at the door. The youth, having made up his mind to say nothing, says it. Unbidden, Mr. Henry Arthur Jones flings open the door and enters, with several typewritten sheets in his hand.

"Then that settles it," soliloquizes the youth inaudibly: "he has allowed door-knocking to develop into a habit. I wonder if he ——" but Mr. Jones is speaking.

"Listen to this," says Mr. Jones; "I think our newspaper correspondent will be sorry he ever drew attention to himself."

He then proceeds to read aloud a long letter he has written to the papers, asserting the right of

dramatists to use strange names for their still stranger characters.

At one point in the letter, Mr. Jones looks up and says:

“Got him there, I think!”

At another:

“That’ll make him sit up!”

At another:

“Pretty neat, eh?”

At another:

“A shrewd thrust!”

The youth adumbrates the necessary affirmations and echoes the mirthful explosions with which the famous playwright punctuates the performance.

The recital over, Mr. Jones rocks gently in his chair for a space, and then asks his visitor if he thinks the letter covers the ground. Upon being assured that it more than covers the ground, he remarks confidentially that he, too, has come to that conclusion.

“Bad taste on the fellow’s part to make such a fuss over a trifle,” sums up the youth.

“Oh, dear, no!” replies Mr. Jones; “he’s welcome to say *what* he likes *how* he likes, as long as

he doesn't object to my doing the same. When you say a man's guilty of bad taste, you merely mean that his taste differs from yours. Anyone with an ounce of individuality has bad taste—according to those without a dram!"

The time has now arrived for the youth to take his departure. He rises and announces his intention. The famous playwright escorts him to the front-door. In the pleasing exchange of adieus, the youth is only dimly conscious of an occurrence that somehow seems familiar; but as he walks down Arkwright Road in the blazing sun, he recalls it, and stands for a moment vaguely wondering whether, in showing him out, Mr. Jones had merely fumbled for the latch or had succumbed to a life-long habit and knocked on the front-door before opening it.

The foregoing is a reasonably faithful record of a personal pilgrimage. It struck me as curious even then that so polite a man as Mr. Jones—anyone who knocks at his own door has carried politeness to the pitch of perfection—should have said the final thing about taste. Polite people are usually shocked by what they term bad taste. Here was a model of

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politeness saying, in effect, that there was no such thing as bad taste.

Mr. Jones may have changed his views before his death. The post-war generation has had a volcanic effect on the opinions and moral standards of its parents. All the same his remark on taste provides me with an admirable text for my final chapter. I think perhaps it was worth a hot climb to Hampstead to obtain it, so I will quote it again:

“When you say a man’s guilty of bad taste, you merely mean that his taste differs from yours. Anyone with an ounce of individuality has bad taste—according to those without a dram!”

In other words, there can be no such thing as bad taste so long as tastes differ. And yet this question of taste, like that other question of truth, is perpetually being discussed in connection with biography; so let us examine it briefly.

The standard of taste is always changing with the times. In Victoria’s reign most people would have thought Mr. Strachey’s work in the worst of taste; but for that matter the Victorians actually did think the works of Fielding and Sterne in execrable taste. What was decent in Charles the Second’s

reign was indecent in George the First's; what was proper in Elizabeth's time was highly improper in Cromwell's. Froude's revelations about the Carlyles horrified the later Victorians; nowadays we wonder what on earth all the fuss was about. Indeed we are constantly nauseated by the proprieties of the middle nineteenth century; just as our successors will be perplexed and possibly disgusted by our mealy-mouthed reticence, which we, with unconscious humor, call outspokenness.

Nearly all our writers are at fault in this. They pander to the taste of their age. They bowdlerize their everyday speech and emasculate their everyday thought. (Dr. Bowdler is, of course, the Patron Saint of all who believe in Bad Taste.) Dickens and Thackeray are today unreadable exactly in proportion as they met the demand of their time for sickly sentiment and the cant of virtue. H. G. Wells will be unreadable fifty years hence to the extent of his Edwardian attitude to sex questions.

Very few writers escape the taint of contemporary taste. At a recent revival of Granville Barker's "Madras House" one had the curious experience of listening to what was attacked as daring and even

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dangerous when it was written, but which would now hardly evoke the lift of an eyebrow among readers of *The Family Herald* (if there is such a paper).

It is all very strange and quite ridiculous. How any class or number of people can pose as the arbiters of good and bad taste, when the standards of both differ in every epoch and in every country at the same epoch, passes the comprehension of anyone who hasn't the funk-hole temperament of a rabbit!

But even though we may be civilized enough not to greet every new manifestation of outspokenness with a shriek of horror, it does not follow that we are capable of practising what we refrain from preaching against. Nor is there any reason why we should be. We are largely the victims of our upbringing and our ancestry. We may be born with a certain delicacy of mind, a temperamental fastidiousness, which not only rebels against the franker forms of revelation but forces us to write euphemistically when a more direct speech would better serve the ideas we have to express. That can't be helped. The shackles of our native prudery may be too

strong for us. We are the children of puritanism in thought if not in deed, and we cannot break our own conventions without a certain loss of self-respect, for which the victorious jettison of our inherited inhibitions could never atone.

The intelligent man's individual taste is therefore made known, not by what he does write about, but by what he doesn't. He cannot help suggesting, by omission, his own standard of taste; but he would never dream of suggesting that it is the final and proper one, or even that anyone else should adopt it.

My own standard would, in certain cases, be fatally disabling to a biographer. I cannot defend it. My intelligence tells me plainly that it is absurd, but unfortunately one is governed by temperament not intelligence. One or two of my character-sketches have been limited by the fact that I cannot make myself discuss the more intimate details of a man's sexual life in print; though I realize that by leaving that aspect of his personality out of the picture one leaves out quite half of the man, and sometimes a very important half too.

My diffidence is not only due to a belief that one

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must be on surer ground with such a matter than with any other—the least mistake over so vital a part of a man's life might be fatal to one's conception of his character—but also to a feeling (ridiculous, no doubt) that I am committing a sort of sacrilege, that I am discussing something about him that I should hate to be discussed about myself.

But, I repeat, this is a personal idiosyncrasy, and though it disqualifies me from writing the biographies of certain people who appeal to me, it does not seriously invalidate my portraits, which I have never pretended are more than single aspects of my sitters.

In my first book of personalities there was a sketch of Stephen Phillips, which scandalized some of his friends and brought upon me the usual accusation of bad taste from people who dislike the truth in any shape or form. Some pontifically idiotic critic, who probably knew more about football than literature, wrote a column of abuse of me on the strength of that single sketch, which took up about half a dozen pages in a book of over two hundred pages. This started off a number of others who wrote long and serious letters to the press, with-

out, of course, troubling to read the book, in which it soon became obvious that my real crime lay in the fact that I had done something they would never have dared to do. True, one or two of them were considerate enough to read the book later; they even wrote to me apologizing for the bunkum they had sent to the papers. But the mischief had been done by then. The critic had given an utterly distorted idea of the book to the world at large; and my remark that the question of taste was simply a question of taste fell on corrupted ears.

The reason I mention the subject here is that Stephen Phillips told me a great deal more about himself than I recorded. He told me things about his sexual life that would have made a first-class sensation, had I thought fit to retail them. But I refrained from doing so, partly because I did not think they were anyone's concern except his own, and partly because of that personal inhibition of which I have spoken—my own fallible but quite immitigable standard of taste.

It may be urged that Phillips's drunkenness was a personal concern, too, but I cannot accept that.

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The kind of life he led was definitely responsible for his serious lapses as a poet; the one explained the other. Besides, a man's habits in a public house are matter for public comment. No man drinks in a bar under the seal of secrecy.

I may add that I exposed myself just as mercilessly as I exposed Phillips, a fact that should have told in my favor. But no! that merely gave the moralizers another bludgeon with which to baste me.

While writing the above, I have discovered another crotchet of mine relative to taste. A friend has sent me the proofs of a book he has just completed, and I have taken exception to a phrase which contains a cheap sneer at the expense of a dead man who was cruelly punished in his life-time for sexual abnormality.

My objection to this particular quip is that it panders to popular prejudice; and I could never, personally, help to swell the hue and cry against a single individual, however strongly I might feel against him.

And so I find myself accusing my friend of questionable taste and advising him to expunge the

passage. It is so easy, I have told him, to get a loud cheer from the gallery when one plays down to its vulgar level of herd-stupidity.

Yet even here I cannot defend my attitude. There is no earthly reason why he shouldn't say exactly what he likes about anybody or anything. I only know that I wouldn't say this particular thing.

Broadly speaking, it may be said that what is considered bad taste in any period is the kind of truth that is temporarily unfashionable and unpalatable. One age will yearn for the truth about religion and shudder at the truth about sex (the Victorian). Another age will welcome the truth about war and dread the truth about economics (our own). Yet another will gasp for the truth about the past and close its ears to the truth about the present (almost any). And when you attempt to tell your age the truth it does not want and refuses to hear, you are considered by all the cowards in creation a shocking fellow, guilty of atrocious taste.

There I must leave the question. The moral of this chapter is that, though we cannot help our individual tastes, we should have enough sense and culture

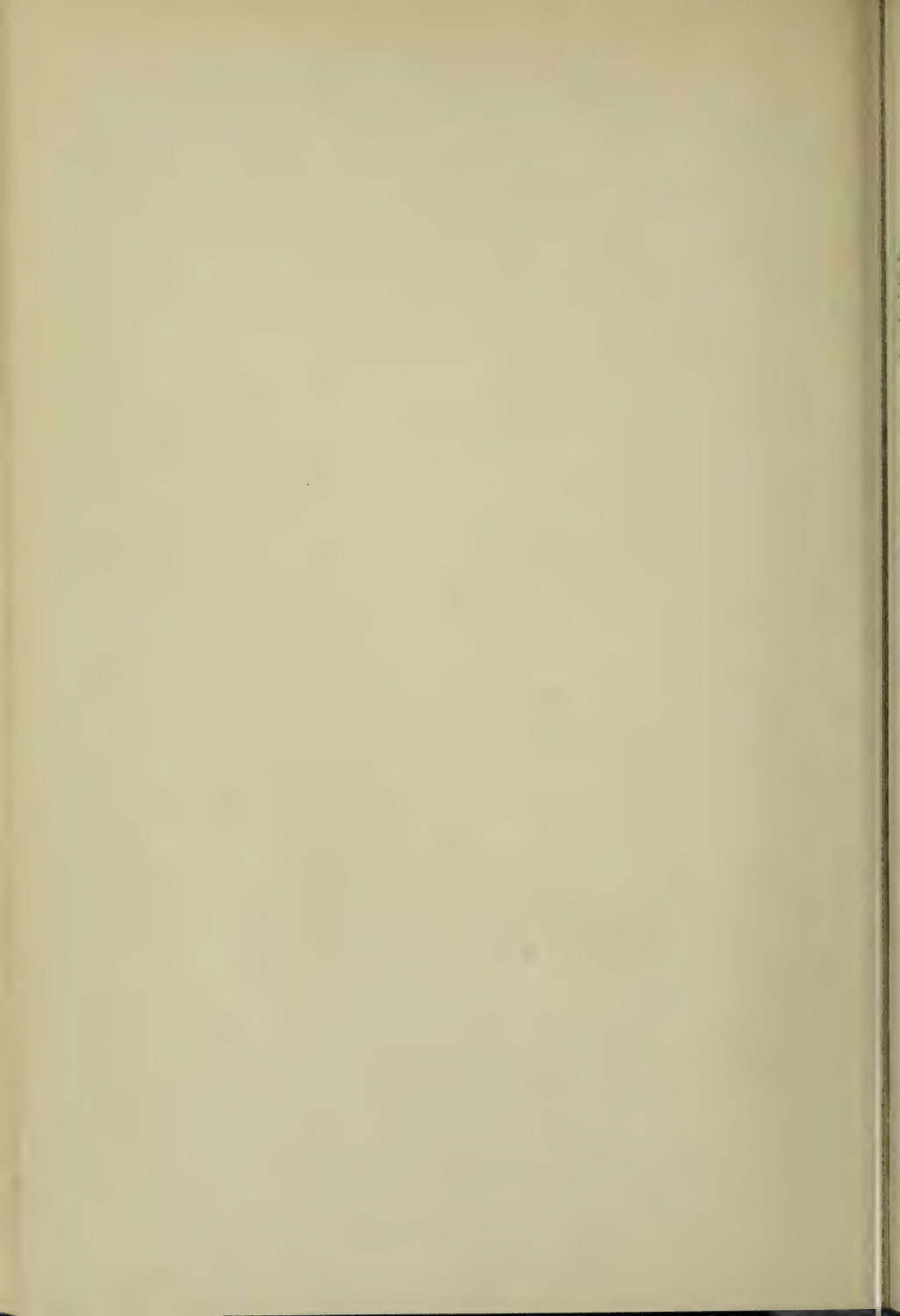
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not to disapprove of other people's tastes, however outrageous they may appear to us.

For I am inclined to think that by no means the worst answer to Pilate's "What is truth?" would have been "Bad taste."

FINIS

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